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HAPPINESS SQUAD

Illustrated by MORROW

If you check in the M.I.T. Science Fiction Society's invaluable Index to the S-F Magazines, 1951-1965, you'll find that since his first story appeared almost a decade ago—in the now defunct Super-Science Stories—Charles W. Runyon has published only two other stories, "Solution, Tomorrow" and "Remember Me, Peter Shepley." Both of them right here in Fantastic and both of them so well received that we're delighted to make it three in a row with this superb—and startling—evocation of a future which has come to believe that the best way to control madness is to encourage it!

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CHARLES W. RUNYON



WHILE his wife dressed, Bran Carroll taped a bomb to the heat-shield of her aircar.

His mind was far from death and destruction. He stripped insulation from the ignition cable and thought of butterflies, of cherry chocolates in a heart-shaped box, of satin ribbons and cranberry sauce . . .

He was a tall lean man with gery eyes and black hair which rose up from his forehead and fell forward again like a breaking wave. His long face wore the lines of worry even when he laughed.

He wasn't laughing now. His furrowed brow was beaded with sweat, cooled by a breeze which crossed the twentieth floor landing balcony. He calculated while he wired the timing device to the bomb: Lura's flight speed averaged two hundred miles per hour; in thirty minutes she'd be two miles above Lake Michigan—

His heart gave a warning tingle. Think of something else, quick! Dandruff, dolls, deltas, dalliance, dandy, daddy—

"Is something wrong with the car?"

Bran jumped at the sound of Lura's voice. Cosmetic surgery had transformed it into a silken caress; once it had been like someone whetting a knife on a coarse stone. He glanced over his shoulder, then relaxed. She was drawing on her magenta driving gloves, accompanying

each jerk with a pinch of her sensuous lips.

"Just checking the fradjulator," he said, closing the hood.

He turned to watch her cross the balcony, tugging a harlequin-styled leotard over her hips. It was half dazzling orange and half black. Lura wore it with the left lapel clipped to her shoulder, displaying one tremulous breast.

She came up to him and tilted her face for a kiss. Bran breathed the spicy carnation odor of her perfume. Her eyes were the deep glowing green of expensive jade; her lashes were caramel-golden fronts. Her face was, in Bran's opinion, the loveliest in the world—and he loathed every pore, every hair follicle and every cell. He had created her face—by tissue graft, nerve transplant, and tendon splice—and he could never create another.

And soon even this creation would be gone, blasted into fluffs of pink-stained tissue—

Pain arrowed his heart. Huge hands seemed to seize his lungs, pulling and stretching them like bread dough. He choked and gasped, certain that the only way he could ever breathe again was to rip out the bomb and throw it over the wall. He fought down the urge. His face broke out in greasy globules of sweat.

"Bran, is something wrong?"

"Just . . . a stomach upset."

"You didn't eat breakfast."

"Later. I promise I'll eat it."

She frowned up at him. "You're nervous—"

"*Nervous?* Don't be silly. Look." He stretched out his hand with fingers spread. "Look, not a tremble. Er, tremor."

She didn't take her eyes off his face. "Bran, go and see Frank—for me."

"What could a psychiatrist do, for my stomach? Take notes while it gurgled?"

"It could be mental, Bran."

He suppressed an urge to laugh. She always looked so little-girl solemn when she discussed matters of the mind.

"Mental?" he repeated. "Okay, it was a mental nothing. A psychosomatic gut rumble."

He smiled. *Look, I'm smiling, just like everybody else. Happy, happy.* Then he thought: Better get her mind off me and that brain-buster. He slid his hand down and pinched her thigh. Her eyes narrowed hungrily; her lips peeled back from perfect teeth. (Too perfect. Why didn't I lengthen them while I had her on the operating table?) She swayed against him, and her cheek felt hot. Her arms slid around his back and squeezed, hinting at the strength which in passion enclosed him like steel cables.

She sighed and drew away.

"Mama expects me, Bran. I'll be back at three."

She climbed in the car and started the rotors. The car rose

slightly, then swung out to poise in space beside the building. Bran watched her dial the controls and wait for her flight to be programmed by the traffic computers.

He smiled. Goodbye, Lura.

She raised her chin, blew him a kiss, then soared up out of sight.

A minute passed. Bran discovered that the smile had stuck to his face like dried paint. He let it dissolve, then looked at his watch. Nine-thirty. The blast would come at ten o'clock.

—Choking. Black mist swirling in his brain. Help!

Only one thing to do. Save Lura. He ran inside the apartment and dialed her aircar. Her image condensed slowly on the screen. For an instant the vise-grip left Bran's chest. He drove his foot through the screen. The television crackled and spewed; he jerked out the plug and threw up a window to let out the vile smoke.

Weakly, he sat down and checked his watch. Only five minutes gone. Twenty-five to go. What could he do to pass the time?

Well, he was due at the plant at ten. (Vision of a long assembly line where television receivers were made from plans drawn almost two centuries ago. All personnel were reconditioned patients like himself, but Bran was the only one who seemed to remember any of his past life. May-

be that's why he was foreman and they were workers.) The plant was only a shaky solution; he could reach a visor from there and warn her. Better risk it anyway, he decided. Carry on as though all were normal. There he'd receive the report of Lura's death, and his colleagues could attest to his grief and shock.

Out in the street, Bran walked swiftly toward the monorail line. In a neighborhood of peeling paint and grimy brick, the psychiatric clinic was a clean rose-marble anomaly. It resembled a quaint tomb with its columned entrance and the legend etched above it:

IN SANITY, PEACE

A man leaned against a column, his bony shoulders jutting against his white jacket. He regarded Bran from friendly gray eyes, while his right hand toyed with a key chain. The chain's disc-like ornament flashed in the sun. The man wore a triangular badge which bore the letters: PAL, and then, in smaller type, the elaboration: Psychiatric Agent—Local. His freckled face creased in a smile as Bran started across the street.

Good old Frank. We'll have a chat in his office and I'll get this business about Lura off my chest.

The smiling man opened the door. Bran sniffed a medley of hospital smells: sharp tang of an-

tiseptic, dreamy anaesthetic. He remembered then. Go through that door and you may not come out. Your body does, but your mind—never. Reconditioning is death . . . little rats' teeth nibbling away your memories—

No!

With a sweaty, gut-wrenching effort Bran tore his eyes from the glittering disc and forced his footsteps aside.

"I'm on my way to work, Frank. See you later."

The friendly man nodded. "Make it soon, Bran. We've a lot to talk about."

A block away, Bran relaxed his iron control and shivered. What about the feral menace in Friendly Frank's eyes? And the knowledge implied by his words? Frank, bosom chum of my boyhood, cohort of my carefree youth, classmate and one-time medical colleague, are you setting me up for another re-con? I know you worked with Lura on the last one. Why? Was the girl that important to you?

"Okay. What's your problem?"

Bran froze. While his thoughts were elsewhere, his feet had carried him through the door of the precinct police station and up to the sergeant's desk. He visualized a covey of patrol ships overtaking Lura's aircar and rescuing her.

"Nothing," he mumbled. As though he were wading through

cold molasses, he turned and walked outside.

Ten minutes left. Where to go? Get the hell off the street, away from people and communications devices. Into this vacant lot. He entered and squatted beside a cocklebur thicket. Rats chittered in the weeds; a gray female swollen with young came out and regarded him accusingly. The intelligence in her black tack-head eyes gave Bran a chill. He gazed at the second hand of his watch as it began rolling up the last five minutes of Lura's life.

But why does she have to die? Because . . .

Hell, forgot. *Damn reconditioning, how it scrambled my memory.* Oh yes. There'd been an accident at the plant two weeks ago, a worker had gashed his face on a projecting cabinet. Seeing the tissues laid open and the blood-flecked bone exposed Bran had known exactly how to rebuild the face. He'd even felt the scalpel in his hand, cutting, slicing, tying, performing tasks he'd never done as an assembly plant foreman. The clumsiness soon returned, but his search had begun. His personnel record said he'd worked there twelve years. So did his memory. But why did he work there? Since Lura was independently wealthy, it seemed logical that Bran would work only to pass the time. Trouble was, he disliked the work—and

that was the fatal flaw in his faked-up past. It wasn't the kind of work a man did for amusement. (Later he learned it was Lura's way of retaining control. She'd know where he was during the day, and in the evenings she'd be with him.) Bran reasoned that whoever had altered his records wouldn't think to counterfeit payroll check stubs—and he was right. A search of musty storage cabinets turned up the first check Bran had signed—two years before. The other ten years were false memories overlying a deeper reality. But knowing he wasn't Brandon Carroll hadn't told him who he really was. So he'd gone into an abandoned district, found a three-year-old directory, and scanned a list of doctors until he came to a name which rang true: Paul Fletcher, cosmetics surgeon in private practice. His last customer had been a woman named Lura Carroll. The building had burned; the doctor and his nurse had died, their bodies too badly charred for revival. So said the records. But knowing that he was Paul Fletcher had led Bran to hope that the nurse was also alive. He'd found her finally, reconditioned like himself. Unlike him, she still believed in her faked set of memories.

Two lives destroyed because Lura wanted to be sole possessor of the most beautiful face in the world. To do that, she'd had to

possess its creator, and to destroy his ability to create another. *Van-ity, thy name is Lura.*

One minute to go. Hurry! Dash across the street to a radio, tell her to bail out. Hurry! See her floating gently to earth on a parachute.

No. I might forgive her for taking my life, or even the nurse's. But forgiveness wouldn't keep her from doing it again the moment she realizes I'm regaining my memory. They're watching me, she and Frank. I can't fool them, and I *won't*—I *refuse* to die a second time.

He watched the second hand sweep around until it touched the fatal minute. He let his breath go in a shuddering sigh (He'd held it a long time) then got up and crossed the street. He walked into a bar, his footsteps echoing the empty room.

"Brandy," he ordered hoarsely.

He carried his drink in front of the television screen and tuned in a news program: Sports roundup . . . answers to yesterday's quiz . . . thirty killed in head on collision of Salt Lake City to Denver monorails. Revival squads had saved all but five whose bodies had been irreparable. Accident due to scheduling error . . . tenth anniversary of last scheduled space run to moon marked by reporter's junket to abandoned Lunar City. Screen

clips showed laughing newsmen caroming down miles of empty steel corridors . . . baby girl born to a Mrs. Carson in St. Louis. (Only fifty miles away, thought Bran. The last baby had been born in Bessarabia three months before, and Lura had flown over to see it.). . . lost tribe unearthed in Amazon jungle, first humans in thirty years to be filmed in primitive unconditioned state. The screen showed the tribespeople, sullen, suspicious, unhappy, being herded into conditioning chambers, then emerging smiling, happy, bland, wearing contemporary clothing, driving aircars, brushing their teeth, bowling. Miracle of modern educational science, they'd become like a billion and a half other people . . .

The news ended without mention of Lura. Strange, thought Bran. Traffic was controlled by computers; the instant Lura's car disappeared from the radar screens, a search would have begun. There was only one possibility: they were checking her disappearance before putting it on the air.

Next news in half an hour. He stepped into a private 'visor booth and dialed the House of Women. No picture appeared; only swirling color patterns conveying the mystery of sex, veiled delights, forbidden pleasure. Odors of incense and mimosa

filled the tiny cubicle; from the speaker came the trickle of fountains, the rattle of shutters, and the click of beaded curtains.

At last came a sound halfway between a sigh and a yawn.

"Megan? It's Bran."

"Oh? You woke me up, Bran."

Her voice held no accusation, only a languid caress as she explained why she'd been up late the night before. She listed her visitors in blithe ignorance of the fact that he sizzled with jealousy: a manufacturer whose wife had left him, three teen-age boys celebrating their graduation, a high official in the bureau of food distribution. . .

Bran ached to tell her she was no sexual libertine, but a loyal efficient nurse named Shirley Abbott, a shy beauty who'd blushed when he inadvertently touched her breast during an operation. His brain recoiled from the picture of her doing with those others what she'd done with him less than a half-dozen times before after their engagement); performing now with gay abandon what with him had been an embarrassing animal function best concealed by darkness. What must she think of me, a customer who never claims his full purchase? But she was no longer the girl he'd loved, she was only a clever pneumatic doll. Someday he'd restore her, but he couldn't afford to awaken her past until

he could arrange her future.

Scented soap smell, splashing sounds . . .

"Turn on your visual, Megan."

"I'm bathing, Bran, but—"

She sat in a black and rose bathtub, bubbles up to her armpits, water glistening on rounded shoulders. Her dark brown eyes held the hint of an oriental fold; her complexion was off-white, her body sleek and softly rounded in a way that suggested an extra layer of tissue beneath her skin.

Seeing her, he ached to be near her. But—her lips pursed in genuine regret—she had to go on a beach picnic in Bermuda. The date had been made by her automatic answering service while she'd slept.

"Don't go, Megan."

"Bran, I must, really." She arranged peaks of soap-foam on her fat little breasts. She was doing it for him. Bran knew, but then she'd have done it for any man, because that's how she'd been conditioned to enter the house of women.

"Anyway," she said, standing up and pulling a plastic bag over her head, "I'm curious about my date. His name is Rob, and he wants to talk about the men who visit me."

A rosy, perfumed mist enveloped her body briefly, then was dissipated by air blowing from hidden nozzles set around the bath cubicle. She stretched and

closed her eyes; the flesh rippled under her arms and on the inner surface of her thighs. She turned her body and sighed, enjoying the touch of air as much as she'd have enjoyed the touch of Bran's hands on her body—or any other man's . . .

"I'll come tonight, Megan," he said. "Maybe there'll be . . . maybe we can—"

He cut himself off before he revealed too much, too soon. He had an uneasy feeling she'd resist leaving her new life. But she'd once loved only him; he prayed that the emotion had survived somewhere beneath that conditioning.

A second news broadcast went by with no mention of Lura. Then a third. Bran left the bar and returned to his neighborhood. He climbed to the twentieth floor of an empty apartment building across the street from his own, entered a vacant suite, squatted beside a window, and peered across a hundred yards of space at his landing balcony. If she'd found the bomb, the police would soon arrive.

Thirty minutes later a flapping sound, like a rug being beaten, drew his eyes upward. A dazzling white aircar descended into the sunless canyons between the buildings with nets suspended from its belly like tentacles from a Portuguese Man-of-War. Bran

saw the red cross emblem of the U.S.P.S. and rammed his back against the wall. In his memory he felt the re-con circuits like worms crawling over his shaven scalp.

But the car continued to descend past Bran's floor. He peered over the edge and perceived that the U.S.P.S. mission of mercy concerned an eighth floor balcony where a woman in a silk wrapper tried to keep a redhaired man in pajamas from throwing himself over the edge. The sound of his shouts rising up to Bran was like: "*Blatfritz! Blatfritz!*"

Knowing he was not the quarry, Bran felt an objective admiration as he watched the Psychsquad maneuver. The car hovered level with the balcony while nets shot out from beneath it and attached themselves to the wall by powerful suction cups. A ramp rolled out like a New Year's Eve noisemaker and a white-jacketed man strode with quiet dignity to the balcony. He was alone and apparently unarmed. The red-haired man charged him, shouting: *Frajum! Frajum!* A foot from his objective he collapsed like a punctured balloon and dropped. The psych-man raised his hand; two attendants traversed the ramp, lifted the redhaired man between them, and returned to the car.

Hmmm, Bran mused. Must be an automatic anaesthetizer. Make

a sudden threatening move toward a psych-man and *blip*.

The psychman slid his arm around the bereaved woman's shoulder a moment, then returned to his car. She waved and smiled as the car ascended.

There, but for the grace of something, stands Lura. And that somnolent slob inside taking his trip to re-con could be me. Poor bastard. They'd make him happy again, but so what. Maybe he liked being miserable.

Hours dragged by. The room stank of musty decay and rat droppings. It had been condemned only two months ago, but already the walls looked like a swiss cheese. The rodent world had moved swiftly to claim its heritage—or perhaps they'd already been inside the walls waiting for the last humans to depart.

At four p.m. Lura's car landed on the balcony. Bran studied her face as she went inside the house, but saw only the gray-lined tautness which comes from a long drive. With a dull bewilderment, he descended to the street, caught the elevator in his own building, and entered his apartment. He tried to tiptoe through to the landing balcony, but she called from the bedroom door:

"Aren't you going to ask why I'm late?"

He turned and studied her face. She looked as she usually did

after the weekly visit to her mother's: tired but happy to be home; bored with woman-talk, appreciative of his maleness.

"Why were you late?" he asked.

She came up to him and rested her forearms on his shoulders. "I stopped to see Frank—about us."

Bran's lips went dry. "What about us?"

"My emotional index read seven point four. Does that surprise you?"

"Not yet. Is it surprising?"

"Usually it's above nine. And it's your fault."

Bran felt like shaking her; she had a way of milking his attention to the last drop. "What have I done?"

She lowered her feathery lashes. "It's what you haven't done—for ten days, Bran."

"Oh? That long?"

"And you haven't gone to work for ten days either. Frank's coming by tonight to talk it over."

Bran felt a shrill terror. Frank would have his psychotrometer (which Frank called, with heavy condescending humor, his "happiness gauge") and if Bran's index were below five (he knew damn well it was) he'd be signed into an observation ward. There they'd learn that he remembered his past life (you couldn't fool all the doctors all the time) and he'd get a one-way ticket to re-conditioning—

"What time is he coming?"

"Around ten, unless—"

Her look would have been coy if she'd managed to keep the knowledge of her power from gleaming in her eyes.

"Call him," said Bran "Tell him—"

"The visor's smashed," she said, smiling. This time the knowledge glittered unmistakably in her eyes. "So . . . we'll just have to wait. Want some of this?"

Gum. She held it out in a green wrapper. "It's handed out free by the U.S.P.S. because it calms the nerves. Everybody's chewing it."

Ah, did they admit a nerve problem then? *Everybody's chewing it, chewing it.* Image of a great herd of animals in a green pasture, chewing. Cows. But there were no cows anymore. Only people and yeast-beef.

She was waiting, so he broke off a tiny slab and put it in his mouth. She watched him begin chewing, then she smiled and patted his cheek. "I'll bathe and then we can talk—while you're giving me a rub."

She turned and walked away, swinging her little rump inside the harlequin pants. Bran waited until he heard water running inside the bathroom (he had no desire to watch *her*, after Megan) then he went to the aircar and threw up the hood.

The bomb was still taped to the heat-shield, its wires intact. The dial of the timer read correctly, but—

Oh God. It wasn't cocked. Just one tiny knob to pull out which set the timer, and he hadn't done it. Or—*had he?* Damn the re-con, that left chaos in a man's mind. Damn the drugs, the psych-men, damn the smiling death of a tranquilized society. Damn, damn it all. Frustration welled up inside him and overflowed. He bent over the hood and beat his closed fist silently against the unyielding metal.

Then he went in to his wife. *Don't think or plan*, he told himself. *Don't hesitate.* Act. Act! ACT!

"Rub my back, please, Bran?"

She lay face down on the bath mat resting her head on her arms. Desire seized him the moment he touched her flesh, which was still warm and inwardly moist from her bath. He felt her ribs sliding beneath her skin. her heart beat strongly. He bent and kissed the back of her neck; she stretched and rolled over. Her eyes were turned back into her head, her nostrils flared, her arms slid around his neck and clung. He picked her up, carried her into the bedroom, and lay her down on the bed. As he bent to kiss her, she giggled:

"You don't need the gum any more, darling."

He straightened slowly; his

brain felt muddy. He spat out the pink wet glob of gum and shook his head. There was something he should be remembering . . .

"How long have we been married, Lura?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Aren't you going to undress?"

He looked at her and felt desire pulsate through his body. He wanted the peace promised by the open arms, the thighs—but there were cobwebs in his mind. He wanted to clear them out.

"How long?"

"Don't you remember, Bran? We were only seven points compatible. The minimum required for cohabitation was eight points. The trouble was, my sexual peak came at eight in the morning, and yours came at six in the evening. So I went into conditioning to have mine changed, and we were compatible to the ninth point."

It sounded logical, but—"When was this?"

"T-twelve years ago."

"What was I doing then?"

"You'd just started work at the plant."

Lying bitch. I was a young intern with a brilliant future. And I didn't even know you.

The haze cleared; he saw the dark grey pouches around her eyes, her lips were wrinkled like an ancient leather purse, her hair was sparse, gray and stringy. The

proud breasts became wrinkled dugs, like spaniel ears. Coarse black hair curled down the inside of her thighs.

I remember. She looked like this before I operated.

He bent to seize her throat in his hands. The vision of delight returned. Desire hammered his brain.

"The gum, Lura?" he asked, straightening. "Did Frank tell you to give it to me?"

She nodded, and he saw the ogre-face again. The urge to kill swept over him, but all he could do was tremble and sweat. He rose and started away.

"Bran, where are you going?"

"Out."

"Now? But . . . I'll be *unhappy!*"

"Take a pill," he said as he went out the door.

The chemist at the pharmaceutical agency was conditioned to please the customer. "Mice, you say?"

"Yes. And rats."

The chemist studied Bran, his blue eyes piercingly bright behind old-fashioned corneal lenses. (Some people were ideologically opposed to mechanical transplants.) Bran tried to slow his rapid breathing, but that only brought a sheen of sweat to his face. He tried visualizing the rats, sleek gray gliding creatures, running, jumping, scurrying—any-

thing but the vision of Lura's death—

"Did you call the extermination agency?"

Bran tensed. What explanation could he give for not calling the government? "Well, no, you see—"

The chemist waved his hand. "Forget it. There'd be a six-month delay before they got to you. Rodents are swarming into the settled areas on the fringes of the abandoned precincts. They burrow tunnels, practically build whole cities underground. In one tunnel they found human bones." He shrugged. "Well, how soon do you want the poison to act?"

"Immediately."

The man raised his brows, and Bran felt a warning tingle. Too strong; tone it down a bit, think of a reason. "I can't have them crawling into the walls to die, stinking."

The man nodded. "You wouldn't want arsenic then. Strychnine, cyanide, aconite—?"

Bran shook his head. "Those names mean nothing to me. Just give me something that has no taste, that works at once—"

Otherwise I'd probably call the hospital and have her saved, or else give her an antidote.

The chemist disappeared into his booth. He came out a few minutes later wrapping a package. "Mergon. A chemical syn-

thetic, coats the nerves so the don't transmit impulses. One grain, pfft. Takes five seconds. Toss the little corpse down the disposal—What's wrong?"

Bran doubled over in a sudden cramping nausea. He made a crouching run to the restroom, where he vomited until his body was slick with greasy sweat. When he returned the chemist sold him a prescription for his stomach (though Bran knew the problem was in his mind) and opened a book in which Bran signed a fictitious name for the poison. He was glad he'd come to a distant neighborhood where nobody knew his identity.

At home he found Lura in a tranquil mist, having dropped two of the green euphoria tablets. She tried to fix supper, but the Cantonese roast duck package had contained Bavarian pigs knuckles instead. They mislabeled everything these days. She'd next tried stew, but the cooker had sizzled and spewed vile smoke. The third cooker to malfunction this year.

"Never mind," said Bran. "Sit in the living room and I'll brew some tea."

When she'd gone, Bran boiled water and dropped in the tea flakes. He opened the chemist's package and found brown-yellow grains inside a plastic packet. The man had said one grain per rat; Bran dropped a half-dozen grains

in one of the teacups, then threw the package into the maw of the disposal unit. Now forget it, he told himself. Right hand cup is Lura's because that has the sugar. Remember that and forget the rest. Right hand cup has the sugar—

He carried the cups into the living room thinking: Got to leave before Frank comes. I'll put her body in the aircar, fly over the lake, and dump her. Should I weight the body? Probably be best . . .

Lura smiled up at him. "I'm anxious to see Frank, you know? He'll fix everything so we'll be happy as clams again."

Trembling, he set the teacup on the table beside her.

"Clams?" he asked through dry lips.

"One of Mama's sayings." She lifted the cup between her long fingers. Her diamond ring shot off an arrow of blue-white light. "I don't know what a clam is, really."

"A bivalve mollusk. Doesn't move, just sits there sucking water through its body." He talked to avoid thought, straining against an urge to leap forward and knock the cup from her hand. "A clam is never happy, because it's never unhappy. "The cup rose slowly, her lips pursed to greet it. (Would they turn fish-belly white as she gasped for air?) "Happiness is one of those

things which run in pairs. Pain-pleasure, hate-love, agony-ecstasy. You can't have one without the other. Therefore any society which tries to promote happiness without accepting unhappiness is doomed to—"

He broke off to watch her adams-apple climb the smooth column of her throat, then descend. She frowned slightly. The lump rose again, descended. Three seconds, four . . . five . . .

Now, *die!*

"Bran, you forgot to put sugar in my tea."

He stared in horror at the cup in his right hand. *Right hand?* A chill climbed his neck. There was a gap in his memory, a complete blank from the time he'd poisoned the tea until he'd begun carrying them into the living room.

He rose shakily. "Here. This has the sugar."

She shook her head. "That's cold. I'll make some more."

He watched her retreat into the kitchen. Shuddering, he walked to the window and dropped his tea, cup and all, into the dim canyon. Chalk up another failure. Psych-man due in two hours. Nibble-nibble of tiny teeth at his brain, screech of trepanning saws, blood-flecked bone-dust, terror, escape—!

—Must have been running, he thought. Gasping like a landed fish, shirt sweat-sodden. Where

am I? Ah, I didn't go mad after all. There's the House of Women across the street: gray windowless walls, girls never left unescorted. But nice inside, a gilded prison—

He deposited a coin in the door (it was nominal to enter; seeing the girls was another matter) and walked through a fountained courtyard to the call board. Only a few lights were lit; most of the girls reached a sexual peak later in the evening, around eleven. Then the board would be a miniature city of lights.

Odd, though, that Megan's light was off. This was her peak hour, as it was for Bran. (Which probably explained how they happened to fall in love in the first place.) He pushed her buzzer and waited. After a minute hersleepy voice came through the grid.

"Rob?"

He clamped his teeth together. "It's Bran, Megan. I've got to talk to you."

"Oh, Bran. It was so nice in Bermuda, and Rob and I . . . well, I took a lovey-pill, and you know . . . I'm just a sleepy-girl now. Some other time?"

"Now, Megan."

"But Bran—" she sighed. "All right. Come up in five minutes."

"Why five minutes?"

"It takes that long for the pill to take effect."

He visualized her, sexually ready, desiring him—but it would

be the aphrodisiac, not Megan.

"No pills, Megan. I'll be right up."

She answered her door in a transparent Greek-styled toga draped over one shoulder and hanging in irregular folds to her knees. She led him through a Moorish courtyard enclosed by spidery marble lattices, past a fountain of perfumed water, and into a silk-hung bedroom. She lay back against a tasseled cushion, drew her knees up beneath her chin, and waited.

"Tell me, Megan," he said lowering himself onto a hassock, "How did you get into this place?"

Her cupid lips smiled. "It was luck, really. One of the girls got married, and—"

"No, no. I meant—what did you do before you came here?"

"I was . . . I grew up in Newfoundland. A cold place. When I was fifteen I came here with a boy; we planned to work awhile and then get married. I worked the street for years, then I was offered a room here in the House of Women. That was two years ago—"

"Two years. That checks perfectly." He pushed his face close to hers. "Shirley Abbott!"

She blinked. "What?"

"Is that name familiar?"

"I've heard it before, but—"

"Clamps, scalpel, forceps—does that ring a bell?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Thirty-two nineteen North Camden Drive?"

"An address—"

"Yours, two years ago. You had a two room apartment and a cat you called Simon."

Her face turned pale. "But my name is Megan, I'm from—"

"False, planted memories. You've got a mole below your left armpit."

She peered under her arm and looked triumphant. "You're wrong—"

"Let's see." He bent to look. "They took it off. See the scar?"

"How do you know it was a mole?"

"How do I know? *How do I know?*" Bran threw up his hands.

"Okay, how much evidence do you need? Shall I tell you the whole story?"

She stifled a yawn with gold-tipped fingers. "I'm tired, Bran. If you'd let me take a pill—"

"You'll remember better if you don't. Now listen, I was a cosmetic surgeon and you were my nurse. We were in love—don't interrupt—we hadn't applied for cohabitation permits yet because there wasn't enough money, but we were absolutely sure of each other. One day a woman came in and asked for the most beautiful face in the world. I told her beauty was a matter of opinion. She said that in that case she wanted what I thought was the

most beautiful face in the world. I needed the money, so I did a major overhaul job on her. It took several months, and by the time I finished she had the idea she wanted me. I told her it couldn't be; I was in love with you. There was another reason which I didn't tell her; that she was an insanely possessive woman who would ultimately have destroyed my career. When I refused her, she threw a two hour tantrum in my office—you were there—and finally left. I thought she'd forgotten the idea as the weeks passed.

"Now I have to go back a little. I grew up with a kid named Frank Duward. We competed in everything, and I always seemed to just barely beat him. At Med-school I graduated in first place and he was second, that kind of thing. We took up different specialties then, I went into surgery and Frank into psych. It looked like our paths had finally diverged—but then we wound up in the same district. Frank was a P.A.L. and I'd just opened my practice. He met you in my office, dated you a few times, then proposed. When you turned him down, he asked me to put in a good word with you. Until then you'd been just an efficient, loyal nurse; now Frank was asking me to see you as a prospective bride—his. I liked the picture so well I asked you

to marry me. Lord! When Frank heard that he acted like a candidate for one of his own strait-jackets. Swore he'd devote the rest of his life, if necessary to getting even with me and you.

"So there it was. Lura wanted me and Frank wanted you. I don't know how they got together; Lura was a type who naturally gravitates toward the psychs anyway. One night you and I worked late at the office. You got sleepy and lay down on the couch, and I began nodding in my chair. I remember thinking I should open a window—and that was my last memory as Doctor Paul Fletcher. The next thing I knew I was Brandon Carroll, factory foreman, with the absolute belief that I's been married to Lura for twelve years."

For a minute Megan continued drawing the hem of her garment through her fingers. Then she lit a six-inch-long gold-tipped cigarette and inhaled languidly.

"If I were you, Bran, I'd volunteer for re-con."

Bran nearly fell off the hassock. "What?"

"You can't fight the U.S.P.S. They've got you down as Brandon Carroll, okay, make the best of it. Get rid of this Paul Fletcher that's dragging you down."

He closed his fists and felt his nails bite into his palms. "You used to love Paul Fletcher."

She moved her rounded white

shoulders. "You say. I don't recall that I ever knew him."

"Suppose you did? What if I gave you back your old identity?"

Her chin jerked up. "Could you do that?"

Bran became suddenly wary. He decided not to tell her his plan to kidnap Frank and force him to erase their conditioning. No point in spreading the burden of secrecy.

"I think so," he said. "Would you leave this place and come with me?"

She frowned. "Wouldn't we . . . have to hide?"

"For a time."

She rose and paced the room, her garment trailing a sensuous perfume of violets. Beneath it Bran saw the enchanting rose highlights and blue shadows of her nude body. He felt his pulse quicken with desire.

"No, Bran," she said finally. "I'm happy now."

"But it isn't you. It's drugs—conditioning."

Her eyes regarded him blankly. "But I feel happy, Bran. Does it matter why I feel it? That nurse, Shirley Somebody—" she wrinkled her small nose, "—she didn't sound happy, all that disinfectant and seriousness." She studied the end of her cigarette. "So I think I'll stick to being Megan. True identity or false, that's who I happen to be."

Bran stood up. He wanted to

throw her over his shoulder and carry her out of this sybaritic sink-hole. But there were others to attend to first: Lura . . . Frank . . .

"Goodbye, Megan."

She put her warm hands on his shoulders and gave him an uncharacteristically sober look.

"Take re-con, Bran. You'll forget me and love your wife again. Then you'll be happy with things as they are."

As Bran walked down the stairs, a fragment of ancient writing slid through his brain: "*Go not gently into that sweet death...*" Easy to say: "Destroy yourself and be happy," but nobody wanted to do it to themselves. Megan, for one . . .

Well, when he was ready, he'd remove her forcefully from the House of Women and replace the wanton courtesan with the woman he loved. She'd be grateful, once it was done.

At the bottom of the stairs, Bran halted and drew back. The wrought-iron gate clanked and a man strolled into the courtyard. He wore a velvet evening cape instead of his usual white jacket, but Bran knew the lean, loose-jointed figure.

Frank. It was ten-fifteen. Had he come from Lura?

The psychman went to the call board and tapped a button with his walking stick. "Meg, it's Rob. Can I come up?"

Bran felt dizzy. He recalled Megan's words: "*His name is Rob, and he wants to talk about the men who visit me.*" Bran felt a blackness swirling in his brain; he wanted to run up behind Frank, seize him by the throat, and choke the life from him. But he needed Frank to tell him how to reverse the reconditioning process. Besides that, there was the automatic protection worn by psychmen; violence would earn him nothing but a quick nap and a rude awakening in the re-con room.

While Frank faced the call board, Bran edged along the wall and silently slipped through the gate. He walked swiftly away from the gray building. In his throat he tasted the bitter bile of jealousy; in his mind he played out the scene between Megan and Frank. She'd see no reason to hide anything from the man she knew as Rob; in any case she'd be pilled-up and perhaps hypnoed by the psychman. They'd be relaxing in post-coital small talk (Frank had desired her before; now that she could be had, he'd have no qualms about mixing business with pleasure) and Megan would say: "*I had an odd visitor before you came, Rob. He claims he knew me in some other life.*" And Frank would drag on his pipe and say: "*Interesting. What was his name?*"

Bran could already see his face

on the familiar USPS wanted posters: DANGEROUS TO HIMSELF AND OTHERS. He had to move tonight; there was no more time.

He turned his steps away from the lighted city, toward the fringing darkness which marked the abandoned precincts. He passed long rows of vacant buildings and weed-grown lots. The rats no longer ran from him; they hunched in the gutters and studied him with an eerie, watchful intelligence.

He hurried toward a glow of light which marked one of the low-class entertainment areas around the strip. One of his workers had said you could find any kind of activity there—if you had the price. He passed a dark apartment house and saw a weird flicker of blue light in one of the windows. An old man sprawled in a doorway lifted his hand and croaked a loose-lipped greeting, then let his hand fall. Happy, thought Bran. No danger to himself or others—but no help either. Bran wanted a man of action.

"Hey-oh," said a woman's voice. "Looking for fun?"

Bran stopped and peered down the alley. A woman sauntered forward; young, with a thin body, a rather large head, large eyes and full sensuous lips. Her nose was flat, but Bran, with his surgeon's training, knew that a one-hour operation could convert her into a stunning beauty.

"Why aren't you in the House of Women?" he asked.

"I like it solo." She thrust out a hip clad in a dark shimmery fabric and rested her hand on it. "Anyway there's a waiting list. I came here when they closed out Louisville."

Suddenly her dress flickered; for the space of a cat's wink it went completely transparent, but before he could focus on her slender body, the dress became opaque again.

She laughed. "My room's upstairs, if you want to see more."

"No, I'm looking for—" He caught himself. Better lead into it gently. "What's the toughest bar in the district?"

She pursed her lips and frowned, rocking her pelvis faintly back and forth. "You don't act anxious to find out."

He took out a bill and gave it to her. She tamped it down the front of her dress and said: "Try the Brown Cow, two blocks straight ahead."

The light above the Brown Cow's doorway was a feeble red haze surrounded by blackness. Bran walked inside, squinted to penetrate the gloom, then made his way toward a row of bottles silhouetted against a mirror.

"Beer," he told the bartender.

The man had huge hairy forearms, cantaloupe-sized biceps, and a thick neck bulging over a stained collar. He set a sweating

glass on the bar, picked up Bran's coin, turned to the cash register, and rang the coin on a metal plate before dropping it in.

Bran took a swallow of the sudsy, lukewarm liquid and asked: "You get many counterfeit coins?"

"Yeah, nothing personal." The mans' tone indicated he didn't care how Bran took it. "Some guys will do anything for money."

"Anything?"

The bartender had a sharp ear. He looked at Bran as though seeing him for the first time, then shrugged. "I'm just making talk. If you got a question, that's different."

Bran extracted a banknote from his wallet and smoothed it on the counter. The bartender glanced at it, put it in his pocket, and leaned forward.

"What's the gig?"

"Where's the man who'll do anything?"

"Okay, okay." The bartender raised his meaty hand, palm out. "Say no more. Come into the back."

Bran followed the man into a low-ceilinged room, brilliantly lighted but soupy with smoke. A muted hum arose from a dozen tables where men sat playing cards; from other tables came the click of dominoes.

"Wait," said the bartender. He went to a card table and bent

toward a fat man with gray-yellow hair fringing a sweat-beaded scalp. Three heavy folds of flesh crossed his forehead. His skin had a witeness never touched by the sun, giving him the look of a fungus which had grown in a cave.

The man rolled a cigar around his lips, glanced at Bran without moving his head, and nodded. The bartender came back and said: "High-card Harry will get your man." Then he went back through the door which led to the bar.

Bran watched the fat man throw down his cards and heave his bulk out of the chair. His massive belly rolled under his trousers as he walked up to Bran.

"You want something Ace? Let's go siddown."

A warm hand gripped Bran's bicep and ushered him to a table covered with green felt and containing one deck of cards. Bran sat down, happy to put the table between him and the fat man's smell of cigars, talcum, after-shave lotion, and sweat long imprisoned by clothing.

The man grinned and picked up the cards. "You look like a respectable man, Ace. What is it? Need an office safe knocked over to correct a bookkeeping error? I've got a man who handles that. Or maybe you need to collect some fire insurance." His pudgy fingers shuffled the deck with

amazing deftness, then turned up the ace of diamonds. He grinned, showing tiny, wide-spaced teeth. "Fee in advance, naturally."

"None of those," said Bran. "It's my wife."

"Wife trouble?" The fat man cut the deck, flipped out the ace of hearts, and winked a pouchy eye at Bran. "I've got your man, Keyhole Johnny, best shadow in the district. With a keyhole camera—well, that's how he earned his name. Wait, I'll see where he is."

Bran put out his hand as the man started to rise. "She's not doing anything wrong—not in that sense. I've just got to get rid of her."

The man slumped into his chair. "Get . . . rid of her?"

Bran felt the twang of tension and wished he'd gone more slowly. But it was begun now.

"It has to be tonight," he said. "She reported me to the U.S.P.S., and they're about to take me for reconditioning—"

"Get out," said the fat man hoarsely. His eyes stared, and a cottony fleck of spittle formed at each corner of his mouth. "Out. Out! OUT!"

The last word was a shout which stilled the scene. Bran walked out through thick silence while a half-hundred eyes swiveled to follow him.

During the next hour he visited a half-dozen more places. He

talked to thieves, prostitutes, counterfeiters, pickpockets and forgers; he spoke cautiously now, but found nobody interested in performing an act of violence—at any price. Fatigue weighted his shoulders as he lifted his hand to the doorknob of yet another shady bistro—

"Don't waste your time, chief."

The voice was deep and muffled, like wet rotten sticks breaking. Bran turned as a massive shadow, topping him by five inches, moved into the perimeter of yellow light before the door. The man wore a leather jacket and a plaid beret which shaded all his face except for a long beaked nose and shaggy white brows. His eyes seemed to glow from deep sockets. Bran felt an icy, inexplicable fear; he started away, but the man gripped his arm:

"Hey-hey. Don't go. Your search is over."

"I don't—" Bran swallowed, cursing the fear which dried his throat. The fingers gouged his arms like talons. "I don't know what you mean."

The man barked a laugh. "Don't say that, chief. I happen to know High-card Harry. Come over here."

There was no way to get free of the hand until the man released him in a dark doorway. By then Bran's curiosity had

smothered his fear. He listened as the other man said:

"You'd have saved a lot of steps if you'd found me sooner. You can't hire that kind of job done by some cheap hood. Tried it yourself first, right?"

"You're talking," said Bran tersely.

"Okay, I'll tell you how it went. You couldn't breathe, your heart kicked up. Maybe you passed out. Or you made some stupid mistake that screwed up the whole caper. Right?"

Bran drew a deep breath. "You've been through it—"

"Me, no. But I've seen others like you. It's the way they condition you when you're a three-year-old kid in sleep-study. You get it over and over: I will not harm a human being. It's grooved into the subconscious. It's the nut that won't crack, Jack; it stays when all your other conditioning is wiped out. Even when you steal, lie and cheat, you can't even tweak another guy's nose."

"I don't believe it. I couldn't hurt Lura, true, but that was because she had me re-conditioned—"

"Hit me in the belly." The man held his arms away from his body. "Go on. Hit!"

Bran went through the mental steps of clenching his fist and plunging it into the other's unprotected stomach. A nauseous sweat broke out on his forehead;

he couldn't move his hand. "Is everybody like this?"

"Everybody minus one." The big man bared his teeth—not in a smile, but rather like a carnivore getting ready to attack. "I'll kill your wife for you."

Bran stared at him. "How, if everybody else—?"

"Remember the Venus colony?"

"I didn't think they'd colonized the planets."

"They did—once. They closed Venus twenty years ago. I was born there, one of six kids to be born off-Earth. They didn't condition me."

"But then there are five others—"

"No, chief. Venus was a tough place to grow up. I was the only one who made it."

"Have you . . . had any other jobs?"

"Last week an old man was found cut in two on a monorail line. His son was getting tired of waiting for his inheritance, so he contacted me."

"I saw it on the 'casts," said Bran. "But so could you."

"What do you mean?"

The voice's quiet menace raised the hair on Bran's neck. "I mean, there's no proof you—ugh!"

The clenched fist sank into Bran's stomach with the full weight of the man's body behind it. Bran was smashed back against the wall like a bag of old clothes.

He slid to the sidewalk, and the drinks he'd consumed spewed out onto the concrete. He was sick, but it was more than physical; it was a raw searing shock to his conscience. *Oh, Lura—*

"There's proof," said the big man. "You never saw that done before."

"No . . . never." Bran rose shakily to his feet and leaned against the building. "The deal . . . I mentioned—"

"Price is one thousand. I guarantee no revivals. The method? I use a garrote. It's quiet—and personal."

He pulled a flexible metal mesh cord from his pocket, wrapped an end around each wrist and made a loop in the center. "I'll put this around your wife's neck, knee in the middle of her back, and—" He snapped the loop out of the cord, at the same time making a juicy cracking sound inside his mouth. "—Like that, you're a widower."

Bran gagged and doubled over, but his stomach was empty.

"Weak stomach?" The man laughed. "Just don't get sick at the wrong time. I'll need help."

"I couldn't—"

"Let me decide what you could, chief. I've been thought before. You know that park along the canal, in front of the Securities Building? Young couples go there at night."

"I know, but—"

"Take your wife there at twelve. That's half an hour. Tell her you're feeling romantic." He snapped the cord. "I'll be waiting. It's better if you don't know exactly where."

He'd have called Lura, but the television was broken. So once again he approached his own home by stealth—peering first into the apartment from a neighboring balcony, then, seeing Lura alone in the living room, entering through the front door. She jumped up.

"Bran! I've been worried."

She was dressed, not precisely for sleeping, but at least for bed: negligee like a black cobweb and nothing much beneath it but curved white flesh. He'd done a good job on her, he had to admit. She was the seductive vision of his dreams.

"Frank was here," she said, "but I sent him away."

Something in her manner made him wary; a meaningful coyness, as if she were about to hand him a surprise package.

"Why?"

"He asked me if I thought you needed reconditioning. I said no. He said he didn't think you were happy. I said it was my fault, because two years ago I'd fallen in love with a young cosmetics surgeon . . ."

She told the story in a rush of words, smothering his interrup-

tions as if she feared to pause until the ending.

"... And then the building burned down two years ago. Paul Fletcher was killed along with his nurse. I was heartsick for a long time, but I've finally realized..."

Bran had to sit down. His head was spinning. Did Lura really believe that Paul Fletcher was some third party, now deceased?

"Lura..."

"... told Frank I'd ask your forgiveness—"

"Lura!"

"What?"

"Remember the leather chair in Fletcher's office?"

"Yes." She frowned. "I didn't know you'd been there."

"In this chair, was there a cigaret burn?"

"Why... yes."

"How did it happen?"

"I dropped a cigaret-Bran! *You knew all the time.*"

It was a convincing performance—and Lura had always been a lousy actress. That meant she believed in her role. Hell! She must have had herself conditioned to forget she'd know him as Paul Fletcher. Well, it was logical—once you realized that Lura, like most people, preferred a pretty illusion to an ugly truth. She'd escaped the ravaging guilt of having destroyed two lives; she remembered only the tingling

excitement of an adulterous affair.

Megan escaped into a lovely dreamlife too. What about Frank? Am I surrounded by zombies?

IS ANYTHING REAL?

Terror blew like a cold wind through his brain. He wanted to find a reality and seize it, never letting go. Lura chose that moment to kneel before his chair and lay her forehead on his knees.

"Will you forgive me, Bran?"

"Oh, Lura—!"

He pressed his lips to her hair, feeling the warmth of her scalp. He studied the whorl of downy hair at the nape of her neck, sniffed the perfumed scent of her body—

The doorbell rang.

"Send them away, Bran," said Lura, rising. "I'll wait in the bedroom."

The hawknosed man leered down at Bran when he opened the door. "You didn't come," said the voice like breaking sticks. "Your visor's off, so I came up. Where is she?"

It came back to Bran, like the crushing weight of a sandbag dropped on his shoulders. *I can't let him kill Lura now. She's guilty, but she doesn't know, so that makes her innocent.*

"Listen," said Bran. "I'll pay you, but the deal's off."

A huge hand shot out, seized

Bran's shirt, and jerked him forward. "The deal's on. Either the one we laid out, or another one you won't like at all. Follow me?"

Bran hated the sweaty fear which shook his body, but he was helpless against the other's violence. "N-no."

"I mean, you know too much about me. Now if I do your job, you've got a reason for keeping quiet. If I don't you got nothing to lose by telling. So it's you or her. Now where is she?"

The man's brutal presence seemed to short-circuit Bran's mind. *Have to trick him, get him to leave...*

"She's in the bedroom—wait!" Bran put his palm against the massive chest. "Don't do it here. I'll bring her to the park by the canal."

The killer studied him. His eyes had all the color and sparkle of oiled ball bearings. "Half-an-hour then. You get one more chance." His teeth flashed in a reptile grin. "Then maybe you both get it."

He strode down the corridor, dangling his metallic cord. Bran shivered and closed the door. In the bedroom, he found that Lura had discarded her negligee and was brushing her hair with long sensuous strokes. He could hear the tiny crackle of static electricity.

"Get dressed, Lura. We're going away."

Her delicate lower jaw sagged. "At one a.m.? Where?"



He thought quickly. "We'll have a second honeymoon—in the Bahamas. Don't—" he said as she rose eagerly, "Don't pack a bag. We'll buy new clothes when we get there."

The lure of the honeymoon worked its magic, and in twenty minutes Lura climbed into the aircar beside him, wearing a mint-green traveling suit. Bran touched the starter. Nothing happened. He got out and raised the hood. A tangled spaghetti of torn and twisted wiring met his eyes. Bran felt a bitter anger burn his nostrils; if the man were here now . . .

"Get out, Lura," he said, trying to stifle the fear in his voice. "We'll walk to the station and get another car."

They were only a block from the apartment when Bran checked his watch and saw that he was due at the park at this very moment. Lura's progress was slow; her tiny pointed heels kept getting caught in the mosaic of cracks in the sidewalk. In minutes, Bran thought, the killer will come looking.

"Hurry, Lura."

"I am, Bran, but these shoes—oh!" She gasped and clutched his arm. "I turned my ankle, Bran. Can't . . . walk any more."

Bran looked desperately around him. An aircab fluttered overhead with its green "Free" light flashing on its belly. Bran raised his

hand, and the cab settled to the pavement beside them.

"Where to?"

The face in the window belonged to a pink-cheeked, curly blond lad just out of adolescence. Bran compared it to the identification tag on the door of the car; they were identical. He helped Lura into the seat and climbed in beside her.

"San Francisco," he said, silencing Lura with a jab of his elbow. He'd correct the instructions later; right now he just wanted to get out of town.

The car lifted them up above the city. Bran was in the middle of a long relieved sigh when the engine sputtered. The car tilted righted itself, then tilted the other way. It flew for a half-minute on a wobbly, erratic course, then suddenly leaped upward, jamming Bran down against his seat. Swearing, the driver peered out the window and started down.

"What's wrong?" asked Bran, trying to keep his voice casual.

"Gyro-stabilizer's stuck," said the driver.

"Can't you make it out of town?"

"Man, I can't steer the crate. Gotta land and get her unstuck. Won't be long."

Bran felt his stomach tighten as the car descended into a wooded area. The driver mumbled something and got out. A breeze rattled the leaves in the trees

around them. The full moon dimmed and brightened behind the combed fleece of a cirrus overcast. The driver's neither portion protruded from the hood, like someone half-eaten by a metal grasshopper.

Lura shivered. Bran slid his arm around her. Protectiveness was like warm honey flowing sweetly in his chest. *She's warm and alive*, he thought, *and I want to keep her that way.*

The driver's face appeared at the window. "It's more serious than I thought. It'll be a half-hour. Why don't you folks take a stroll? It's a nice night. This is where the young couple come."

Bran's spine felt like a shaft of ice. "Where are we?"

"The park next to the canal. By the Securities Building." His right eye closed in a wink. "Isn't this where you wanted to come?"

The friendly innocent face left the window; the driver disappeared into the surrounding shrubbery. Bran's nose caught the moldy turtle-stink of the abandoned canal; he imagined the killer's hunched shape in every bush, saw the flash of his metal garrote in each glint of moonlight on dewdrop.

"Let's walk, Lura."

She moaned. "Bran, with my ankle?"

"I'll carry you."

She giggled with pleasure as

he slid one arm under her knees and encircled her back with the other. He lifted her out of the car, staggered as he settled her hip against his stomach, then started off toward the nearest glow of city lights. Three hundred yards, he estimated. The lights would protect them until they caught another aircar.

Fear clutched his stomach as something moved beneath a tree—but it was only an embracing couple shifting armholds. Pain stabbed his biceps, and his knees buckled a little more with each step. He'd gone a hundred yards; Lura's weight had risen from one-ten to two-twenty and was still increasing. Besides that, her estrogens had been aroused by the contact of their bodies. She slid her hand inside his shirt and caressed his chest with her palm. Her hot lips nuzzled his throat.

"Put me down," she whispered. "Let's get started on that second honeymoon."

That, he thought, would be a fine way for the killer to find us. But he couldn't carry her any further. He tilted her so that her feet touched the ground.

"Keep walking," he said.

She groaned, but gripped his arm and limped beside him. The street lights came nearer: a hundred-fifty yards, a hundred, seventy-five . . . He saw pavement through the bushes.

"Let's sit down and smoke," said Lura.

"Smoke while you're walking."

He gave her a cigaret, lit it, and glanced around in the flare of the lighter. Seeing nothing, he pocketed the lighter. The night closed in, darker than before. Fifty yards to go. He seized Lura's arm and pulled her along beside him.

Pop. A sound like a cork coming out of a bottle, then a sizzling sound like carbonated water, like eggs frying. Bran stared around, trying to locate the source of the sound. Suddenly an icy coldness enveloped him. He felt himself falling; he tried to cling to Lura, but she was torn from his grasp.

"Bra—!"

The cry was choked off, followed by a crash of shrubbery. Bran thought of that huge savage beast bruising the acquiescent softness of Lura; he struggled to move but his nerve impulses failed to reach his muscles. *Freeze-gas*, came the word from his memory. He could feel grass pressing against his cheek—but remotely, as though his skin were coated with a thin plastic flim. He wished the gas had deafened him as well as inhibiting action. Too clearly, he heard the sound of something heavy being dragged away. Then came a splash from the canal. Something twisted and died inside him.

A minute passed. A dark shape came unstuck from the surrounding blackness and approached Bran. The moon shone on the killer's white teeth, glinted on the cord hanging from his wrist. Bran thought he was going to die—and he didn't care.

"Relax, chief. You're safe—if you brought the money."

His hands patted Bran's pockets, took out the wallet and opened it. "I'm charging a hundred extra for the cost of the aircar. Another hundred for trying to weasel out. That cleans you, chief."

He laughed and tossed the wallet on Bran's stomach.

"In case you wonder, she's ten feet down with fifty pounds of scrap iron around her waist. You'll be froze-out for a couple of hours. By the time you come to she'll be past reviving. One of my guarantees." He nudged Bran's rib with his toe. "So long. It's been a pleasure."

After an hour Bran could move his eyes from side to side. Another half-hour and he managed a gurgled croak. Nobody answered; the city was silent.

When he could rise, he staggered to the canal and tried to find where she'd been dropped in. He was poorly coordinated; he fell several times, tearing his pants, puncturing his hand on a sharp twig, stumbling into the canal, over his head in fetid water.

By five a.m. he knew there was no need looking further for her. Revival would have been impossible, since she'd been submerged past the three-hour limit. He walked home and entered the apartment. It seemed bleak and barren. Life itself seemed bleak. He wandered into the bedroom and saw Lura's negligee on the floor.

How many times have I told her—? Then he remembered that he'd never be telling her again. He buried his face in the perfumed fabric, trying to catch the smell of Lura. Blood from his punctured hand stuck to the garment.

He went to the bathroom and washed his hands, watching the clear tap water merge with the blood and swirl down the drain. He saw Lura at the bottom of the murky canal, hair swirling, body tugging at the weight around her waist.

No escape, he thought. No escape from the memory.

Or was there?

The rising sun touched the roof of the USPS clinic as Bran pressed the bell. Frank opened the door and took the pipe from his mouth.

"Come in Bran. I was expecting you. Too bad about Lura."

Bran took one step inside and froze. "You know about her?"

"We know. Sit down and roll up your sleeve."

Too dazed to do anything but comply, Bran lowered himself to a white stool and started turning up his sleeve. "You know all about Lura? About the bomb in the aircar?"

Frank nodded gravely as he punctured a rubber bottle cap with the needle of a hypodermic syringe. "Yes, we know."

"And the poison in the tea?"

"Oh certainly the poison." Slowly he filled the hypo with a pale yellow liquid.

"You knew about Megan?" asked Bran.

"All about Megan," said Frank, wrapping a thin rubber tube around Bran's bicep.

"And High-card Harry and the man with the metal cord, and—"

"Easy, Bran. Of course we know about those people. We've been watching you for the last two weeks."

"But—why didn't you take me in?"

"You had to volunteer for treatment. That's U.S.P.S. policy."

"But Lura's dead! He killed her!"

Frank, probing for the vein in Bran's elbow, paused to regard him quizzically: "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No!" blurted Bran.

The needle slid in, discharged its yellow cargo. Frank drew it out, dabbed a ball of cotton on the puncture, and flexed Bran's

arm to hold it in place. He leaned back, frowning at Bran.

"You didn't want your wife's death? Whose did you want?"

"Nobody's.

"Nobody's? Look at me, Bran."

Bran tried to raise his eyes to meet Frank's, but the glittering disc on his watch chain held his attention.

"No—I don't know." Bran felt drowsy. The disc became a winking, flashing light.

"Maybe you wanted Megan's death," suggested Frank.

"No . . ." Colored lights now, spiraling.

"Or mine?"

"No," said Bran. The sound was distant; he was drifting down a long corridor.

"Whose death then? Your own, perhaps?"

"Yes, that's it . . ." mumbled Bran. "My own . . . death."

"Ah yes. Now we can terminate treatment."

Frank's words came out of blackness, and Bran knew nothing more . . .

. . . Until he woke up in a hospital bed. A redhaired nurse held his clothes in one hand and a green pill in the other. "Swallow this and put these on. You're going home."

"But—" Bran swallowed the minty tablet. "What about reconditioning?"

"You've had it. Didn't you ever hear of environmental therapy?"

She shook his trousers. "Hurry. He's waiting to give you your final check-out."

"He" turned out to be Frank Duward, his old—

"No, thought Bran. *He's not my old school chum. I never saw him before six months ago.*

He sat down, feeling a warm respect for the kindly man who sat behind the desk lighting his pipe. He felt a new vigor pulsing in his veins, a readiness to jump up and start doing—what? If Lura were alive, he thought, that second honeymoon would be a wonderful idea . . .

"Let's begin your check-out," said Frank. "Do you know this man?"

Bran peered at the photograph of a fleshy, dark-haired man with the bland good looks of a television announcer.

Bran nodded. "I've seen him, but I can't say his name."

"Paul Fletcher," said Frank. "The one who actually died in a fire two years ago with his nurse, Shirley Abbott." Frank gave him a slanted, raise-eyebrow look. "Do you believe that?"

He was Brandon Carroll, had always been. He was sure of that. Employed for twelve years at the Fenwick assembly plant. On at ten a.m., off at four p.m., with a two hour lunch period. Bowling and music during the lunch-break. He liked the work, liked the fellows. He couldn't

imagine how he'd ever been discontented.

"Yes. But some things I don't understand—"

"I'll review your case briefly," said Frank. "Six months ago you accused your wife of having had an affair with this young cosmetic surgeon, Paul Fletcher. She reported it to me, knowing that groundless jealousy is often a symptom of paranoia. I investigated. You'd already begun to identify with Fletcher; you imagined your wife to have been horribly ugly, while actually she'd only gone to Fletcher to have a few lines removed from around her eyes. I called in our environmental therapy group—we call it the "Happiness Squad"—and began pushing your illness to a climax. Otherwise it might have dragged on for years. By sleep-hypnosis we strengthened your identity as Paul Fletcher and suggested your affair with the nurse. (What really passed between Fletcher and Miss Abbott we have no idea.) Megan's presence was the acceleration factor; she was the catalyst which forced you to act."

"Is Megan a member of the squad?"

"Of course. Not quite the libertine she pretended to be, nor the prude you imagined the nurse to be." He rubbed his pipe against his nose and studied Bran.

"You want to see her?"

Bran shook his head. He recalled Megan as a pleasant attractive girl, but felt nothing toward her.

"Where did you come in?"

"Me? Just a neighborhood psychman. You dreamed up that old rivalry to explain your hostility toward me. You thought I was in your way."

"I might have killed you."

Frank smiled. "No danger of that. The anti-violence block was real; it caused you to bungle those attempts to kill Lura. Not that we took risks. We contacted the man at the pyrotechnic agency, where you bought your bomb. Even if it had exploded, it wouldn't have blown your hat off your head. We also indoctrinated the chemist, so the poison you bought was nothing but dried wax. That drunk you saw in the doorway last night, and the girl with the peekaboo dress were both our people. I'm afraid you can't meet them. The squad has left for New Orleans, where a man thinks he wants to kill his business partner."

Bran could hardly control his growing excitement. "And the man from Venus?"

"We call him the strangler. He's captain of the squad."

"Then . . . where's Lura?"

Smiling, Frank leaned forward and pressed a button. "Send in the patient's wife."

Seeing her was too much. Joy

burst like a rocket inside his head. He embraced her, sobbing and laughing; he buried his nose in her perfumed hair and kissed her tear-wet face.

"Bran!" she cried. "You were so *funny* when you carried me in the park."

"Your ankle wasn't hurt?"

"No, *no!*"

"And that business of wanting a cigaret—"

"I knew where the strangler waited. I was supposed to get you in position."

He gripped her shoulders. "I ought to—"

"What?" she asked, raising her tear-wet eyes.

"Let's go home," he mumbled thickly. "I'll do it there."

Outside, the world had a clean, scrubbed look. The buildings all looked freshly painted; all colors were underlaid by a liquid violet hue, lending a dreamy, magical atmosphere to the scene. The sky was polished blue porcelain.

"Is it always like this?" he asked. "Or was it the green pill I took?"

"Both," she said laughing. "Does it matter?"

Bran smelled the musk of marigolds growing in a vacant lot. The joy of living bubbled up and tickled his nose like carbonated water. He laughed and took Lura's hand.

In the vacant lot, the rats fought, bred and died, knowing neither peace nor happiness.

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SHIFTING SEAS

STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

Illustrated by MOREY

If all you know about the late Stanley G. Weinbaum is that back in the thirties he dreamed up some delightfully plausible aliens—such as Tweel the Martian and Oscar the Lotus Eater—then the following short may come as quite a surprise. For not only is it excellent “straight” sciencefiction—set right here on Earth—but it also offers a disturbingly cogent glimpse of the catastrophe that would follow if one day the Isthmus of Panama disappeared!

IT developed later that Ted Welling was one of the very few eye-witnesses of the catastrophe, or rather, that among the million and a half eye-witnesses, he was among the half dozen that survived. At the time he was completely unaware of the extent of the disaster, although it looked bad enough to him in all truth!

He was in a Colquist gyro, just north of the spot where Lake Nicaragua drains its brown overflow into the San Juan, and was bound for Managua, seventy-five miles north and west across the great inland sea. Below him,



quite audible above the muffled whirl of his motor, sounded the intermittent clicking of his tri-panoramic camera, adjusted delicately to his speed so that its pictures could be assembled into a beautiful relief map of the terrain over which he passed. That, in fact, was the sole purpose of his flight; he had left San Juan del Norte early that morning to traverse the route of the proposed Nicaragua Canal, flying for the Topographical branch of the U.S. Geological Survey. The United States, of course, had owned the rights to the route since early

in the century—a safeguard against any other nation's aspirations to construct a competitor for the Panama Canal.

Now, however, the Nicaragua Canal was actually under consideration. The overburdened ditch that crossed the Isthmus was groaning under the traffic of the 1940's, and it became a question of either cutting the vast trench another eighty-five feet to sea-level or of opening an alternate passage. The Nicaragua route was feasible enough; there was the San Juan emptying from the great lake into the Atlantic, and there was Lake Managua a dozen miles or so from the Pacific. It was simply a matter of choice, and Ted Welling, of the Topographical Service of the Geological Survey, was doing his part to aid the choice.

At precisely 10:40 it happened. Ted was gazing idly through a faintly misty morning toward Ometepe, its cone of a peak plumed by dusky smoke. A hundred miles away, across both Lake Nicaragua and Lake Managua, the fiery mountain was easily visible from his altitude. All week, he knew, it had been rumbling and smoking, but now, as he watched it, it burst like a mighty Roman candle.

There was a flash of white fire not less brilliant than the sun. There was a column of smoke with a red core that spouted upward like a fountain and then mush-

roomed out. There was a moment of utter silence in which the camera clicked methodically, and then there was a roar as if the very roof of Hell had blown away to let out the bellows of the damned!

Ted had one amazed thought—the sound had followed too quick—on the eruption! It should have taken minutes to reach him at that distance—and then his thoughts were forcibly diverted as the Colquist tossed and skittered like a leaf in a hurricane. He caught an astonished glimpse of the terrain below, of Lake Nicaragua heaving and boiling as if it were the seas that lash through the Straits of Magellan instead of a body of land-locked fresh water. On the shore to the east a colossal wave was breaking, and there in a banana grove frightened figures were scampering away. And then, exactly as if by magic, a white mist condensed about him, shutting out all view of the world below.

He fought grimly for altitude. He had had three thousand feet, but now, tossed in this wild ocean of fog, of up-drafts and down-drafts, of pockets and humps, he had no idea at all of his position. His altimeter needle quivered and jumped into the changing pressure, his compass spun, and he had not the vaguest conception of the direction of the ground. So he struggled as best he could, listening anxiously to the changing whine of his blades

as strain grew and lessened. And below, deep as thunder, came intermittent rumblings that were, unless he imagined it, accompanied by the flash of jagged fires.

Suddenly he was out of it. He burst abruptly into clear air, and for a horrible instant it seemed to him that he was actually flying inverted. Apparently below him was the white sea of mist, and above was what looked at first glance like dark ground, but a moment's scrutiny revealed it as a world-blanketing canopy of smoke or dust, through which the sun shone with a fantastic blue light. He had heard of blue suns, he recalled; they were one of the rarer phenomena of volcanic eruptions.

His altimeter showed ten thousand. The vast plain of mist heaved in gigantic ridges like rolling waves, and he fought upward away from it. At twenty thousand the air was steadier, but still infinitely above was the sullen ceiling of smoke. Ted leveled out, turning at random north-east, and relaxed.

"Whew!" he breathed. "What—what happened?"

He couldn't land, of course, in that impenetrable fog. He flew doggedly north and east, because there was an airport at Bluefields, if this heaving sea of white didn't blanket it.

But it did. He had still half a tank of fuel, and he bored grim-

ly north. Far away was a pillar of fire, and beyond it to the right, another and a third. The first, of course, was Ometepe, but what were the others? Fuego and Tajumulco? It seemed impossible.

Three hours later the fog was still below him, and the grim roof of smoke was dropping as if to crush him between. He was going to have to land soon; even now he must have spanned Nicaragua and be somewhere over Honduras. With a sort of desperate calm he slanted down toward the fog and plunged in. He expected to crash; curiously, the only thing he really regretted was dying without a chance to say goodbye to Kay Lovell, who was far off in Washington with her father, old Sir Joshua Lovell, Ambassador from Great Britain since 1941.

When the needle read two hundred, he leveled off—and then, like a train bursting out of a tunnel, he came clear again! But under him was wild and raging ocean, whose waves seemed almost to graze the ship. He spun along at a low level, wondering savagely how he could possibly have wandered out to sea. It must he supposed, be the gulf of Honduras.

He turned west. Within five minutes he had raised a storm-lashed coast, and then—miracle of all miracles—a town! *And* a landing field. He pancaked over

it, let his vanes idle, and dropped as vertically as he could in that volley of gusty winds.

It was Belize in British Honduras. He recognized the port even before the attendants had reached him.

"A Yankee!" yelled the first. "Ain't it Yankee luck for you?"

Ted grinned. "I needed it. What happened?"

"The roof over this part of Hell blew off. That's all."

"Yeah, I saw that much. I was over it."

"Then you know more'n any of us. Radio's dead and there ain't no bloomin' telegraph at all."

It began to rain suddenly, a fierce, pattering rain with drops as big as marbles. The men broke for the shelter of a hangar, where Ted's information, meager as it was, was avidly seized upon, for sensational news is rare below the Tropic of Cancer. But none of them yet realized just how sensational it was.

It was three days before Ted, and the rest of the world as well, began to understand in part what had happened. This was after hours of effort at Belize had finally raised Havana on the beam, and Ted had reported through to old Asa Gaunt, his chief at Washington. He had been agreeably surprised by the promptness of the reply ordering him instantly to the Capital; that meant a taste

of the pleasant life that Washington reserved for young departmentals, and most of all, it meant a glimpse of Kay Lovell after two months of letter-writing. So he had flown the Colquist gayly across Yucatan Channel, left it at Havana, and was now comfortably settled in a huge Caribbean plane bound for Washington, boring steadily north through a queerly misty mid-October morning.

At the moment, however, his thoughts were not on Kay. He was reading grim newspaper accounts of the catastrophe, and wondering what thousand-to-one shot had brought him unscathed through the very midst of it. For the disaster overshadowed into insignificance such little disturbances as the Yellow River flood in China, the eruption of Krakatoa, the holocaust of Mont Pelee, or even the great Japanese earthquake of 1923, until now the most terrible visitation ever inflicted on a civilized race.

For the Ring of Fire, that vast volcanic circle that surrounds the Pacific Ocean, perhaps the last unhealed scars of the birth-throes of the Moon, had burst into flame. Aniakhak in Alaska had blown its top away, Fujiyama had vomited lava, on the Atlantic side La Soufriere and the terrible Pelee had awakened again.

But these were minor. It was at the two volcanic foci, in Java and Central America, that the

fire-mountains had really shown their powers. What had happened in Java was still a mystery, but on the Isthmus—that was already too plain. From Mosquito Bay to the Rio Coco, there was—ocean! Half of Panama, seven-eighths of Nicaragua—and as for Costa Rica, that country was as if it had never been. The Canal was a wreck, but Ted grinned a wry grin at the thought that it was now as unnecessary as a pyramid. North and South America had been cut adrift, and the Isthmus, the land that had once known Atlantis, had gone to join it.

In Washington Ted reported at once to Asa Gaunt. That dry Texan questioned him closely concerning his experience, grunted disgustedly at the paucity of information, and then ordered him tersely to attend a meeting at his office in the evening. There remained a full afternoon to devote to Kay, and Ted lost little time in so devoting it.

He didn't see her alone. Washington, like the rest of the world, was full of excitement of the earthquake, but in Washington more than elsewhere the talk was less of the million and a half deaths and more largely of the other consequences. After all, the bulk of the deaths had been among the natives, and it was a sort of remote tragedy, like the perishing of so many Chinese. It affected only those who had

friends or relatives in the stricken region, and these were few in number.

But at Kay's home Ted encountered an excited group arguing physical results. Obviously, the removal of the bottleneck of the Canal strengthened the naval power of the United States enormously. No need now to guard the vulnerable Canal so intensively. The whole fleet could steam abreast through the four hundred mile gap left by the subsidence. Of course the country would lose the revenues of the toll-charges, but that was balanced by the cessation of the expense of fortifying and guarding.

Ted fumed until he managed a few moments of greeting with Kay alone. Once that was concluded to his satisfaction, he joined the discussion as eagerly as the rest. But no one even considered the one factor in the whole catastrophe that could change the entire history of the world.

At the evening meeting Ted stared around him in surprise. He recognized all those present, but the reasons for their presence were obscure. Of course there was Asa Gaunt, head of the Geological Survey, and of course there was Golsborough, Secretary of the Interior, because the Survey was one of his departments. But what was Maxwell, joint Secretary of War and the Navy, doing there? And why was silent

John Parrish, Secretary of State, frowning down at his shoes in the corner?

Asa Gaunt cleared his throat and began. "Do any of you like eels?" he asked soberly.

There was a murmur. "Why, I do," said Golsborough, who had once been Consul at Venice. "What about it?"

"This—that you'd better buy some and eat em tomorrow. There won't be any more eels."

"No more eels?"

"No more eels. You see, eels breed in the Sargasso Sea, and there won't be any Sargasso Sea."

"What *is* this?" growled Maxwell. "I'm a busy man. No more Sargasso Sea, huh!"

"You're likely to be busier soon," said Asa Gaunt dryly. He frowned. "Let me ask one other question. Does anyone here know what spot on the American continent is opposite London?"

Golsborough shifted impatiently, "I don't see the trend of this Asa," he grunted, "but my guess is that New York City and London are nearly in the same latitude. Or maybe New York's a little to the north, since I know its climate is somewhat colder."

"Hah!" said Asa Gaunt. "Any disagreement?"

There was none. "Well," said the head of the Survey, "you're all wrong, then. London is about one thousand miles north of New York. It's in the latitude of southern Labrador!"

"Labrador! That's practically the Arctic!"

Asa Gaunt pulled down a large map on the wall behind him, a mercator projection of the world.

"Look at it," he said. "New York's in the latitude of Rome, Italy. Washington's opposite Naples. Norfolk's level with Tunis in Africa, and Jacksonville with the Sahara Desert. And gentlemen, these facts lead to the conclusion that next summer is going to see the wildest war in the history of the world!"

Even Ted, who knew his superior well enough to swear to his sanity, could not resist a glance at the faces of the others, and met their eyes with full understanding of the suspicion in them.

Maxwell cleared his throat. "Of course, of course," he said gruffly. "So there'll be a war and no more eels. That's very easy to follow, but I believe I'll ask you gentlemen to excuse me. You see, I don't care for eels."

"Just a moment more," said Asa Gaunt. He began to speak, and little by little a grim understanding dawned on the four he faced.

Ted remained after the appalled and sobered group had departed. His mind was too chaotic as yet for other occupations, and it was already too late in the evening to find Kay, even had he dared with these oppressive revelations weighing on him.

"Are you sure?" he asked nervously. "Are you quite certain?"

"Well, let's go over it again," grunted Asa Gaunt, turning to the map. He swept his hand over the white lines drawn in the Pacific Ocean. "Look here. This is the Equatorial Counter Current, sweeping east to wash the shores of Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama."

"I know. I've flown over every square mile of that coast."

"Uh." The older man turned to the blue-mapped expanse of the Atlantic. "And here," he resumed, "is the North Equatorial Drift, coming west out of the Atlantic to sweep around Cuba into the Gulf, and to emerge as—the Gulf Stream. It flows at an average speed of three knots per hour, is sixty miles broad, a hundred fathoms deep, and possesses, to start with, an average temperature of 50%. And here"—he jabbed a finger at New foundland—"it meets the Labrador Current and turns east to carry warmth to all of Western Europe. *That's* why England is habitable; *that's* why southern France is semi-tropical; *that's* why men can live even in Norway and Sweden. Look at Scandinavia, Ted; it's in the latitude of central Greenland, level with Baffin Bay. Even Eskimos have difficulty scraping a living on Baffin Island."

"I know," said Ted in a voice like a groan. "But are you cer-

tain about—the rest of this?"

"See for yourself," growled Asa Gaunt. "The barrier's down now. The Equatorial Counter Current, moving two knots per hour, will sweep right over what used to be Central America and strike the North Equatorial Drift just south of Cuba. Do you see what will happen—is happening—to the Gulf Stream? Instead of moving north-east along the Atlantic coast, it will flow almost due east, across what used to be the Sargasso Sea. Instead of bathing the shores of Northern Europe, it will strike the Spanish peninsula, just as the current called the West Wind Drift does now, and instead of veering north it will turn *south*, along the coast of Africa. At three knots an hour it will take less than three months for the Gulf Stream to deliver its last gallon of warm water to Europe. That brings us to January, 1945—and after January, what?"

Ted said nothing.

"Now," resumed Asa Gaunt grimly, "the part of Europe occupied by countries dependent on the Gulf Stream consists of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the British Isles, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and to a lesser extent, Poland, Lithuanian, Latvia, Esthonia and Finland. Before six months have passed, Ted, you're going to see a realignment of Europe. The Gulf Stream countries are going to be driven together; Germany and

France are suddenly going to become bosom friends, and France and Russia, friendly as they are today, are going to be bitter enemies. Do you see why?"

"N-no."

"Because the countries I've named now support over two hundred million inhabitants. *Two hundred million*, Ted! And without the Gulf Stream, when England and Germany have the climate of Labrador, and France of Newfoundland, and Scandinavia of Baffin Land—how many people can those regions support *then*? Three or four million, perhaps, and that with difficulty. *Where will the others go?*"

"Where?"

"I can tell you where they'll *try* to go. England will try to unload its surplus population on its colonies. India's hopelessly overcrowded, but South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand can absorb some. About twenty-five of its fifty millions, I should estimate, because Canada's a northern country and Australia desert in a vast part of it. France has Northern Africa, already nearly as populous as it can be. The others—well, *you* guess, Ted."

"I will, Siberia, South America, and—the United States!"

"A good guess. That's why Russia and France will no longer be the best of friends. South America is a skeleton continent, a shell. The interior is unfit for

white men, and so—it leaves Siberia and North America. What a war's in the making!"

"It's almost unbelievable!" muttered Ted. "Just when the world seemed to be settling down, too."

"Oh, it's happened before," observed Asa Gaunt. "This isn't the only climatic change that brought on war. It was decreasing rainfall in central Asia that sent the Huns scouring Europe, and probably the Goths and Vandals as well. But it's never happened to two hundred million civilized people before!" He paused. "The newspapers are all shrieking about the million and a half deaths in Central America. By this time next year they'll have forgotten that a million and a half deaths ever rated a headline!"

"But good Lord!" Ted burst out. "Isn't there anything to be *done* about it?"

"Sure, sure," said Asa Gaunt. "Go find a nice tame earthquake that will raise back the forty thousand square miles the last one sunk. That's all you have to do, and if you can't do that, Maxwell's suggestion is the next best: build submarines *and* submarines. They can't invade a country if they can't get to it."

Asa Gaunt was beyond doubt the first man in the world to realize the full implications of the Central American disaster, but he was not very much ahead of

the brilliant Sir Phineas Grey of the Royal Society. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on which shore of the Atlantic you call home), Sir Phineas was known to the world of journalism as somewhat of a sensationalist, and his warning was treated by the English and Continental newspapers as on a par with those recurrent predictions of the end of the world. Parliament noticed the warning just once, when Lord Rathemere rose in the Upper House to complain of the unseasonably warm weather and to suggest dryly that the Gulf Stream be turned off a month early this year. But now and again some oceanographer made the inside pages by agreeing with Sir Phineas.

So Christmas approached very quietly, and Ted, happy enough to be stationed in Washington, spent his days in routine topographical work in the office, and his evenings, as many as she permitted, with Kay Lovell. And she did permit an increasing number, so that the round of gaiety during the holidays found them on the verge of engagement. They *were* engaged so far as the two of them were concerned, and only awaited a propitious moment to inform Sir Joshua, whose approval Kay felt, with true English conservatism, was a necessity.

Ted worried often enough about the dark picture Asa Gaunt had drawn, but an oath of secrecy

kept him from ever mentioning it to Kay. Once, when she had casually brought up the subject of Sir Phineas Grey and his warning, Ted had stammered some inanity and hastily switched the subject. But with the turn of the year and January, things began to change.

It was on the fourteenth that the first taste of cold struck Europe. London shivered for twenty-four hours in the unheard-of temperature of twenty below zero, and Paris argued and gesticulated about its *grands froids*. Then the high pressure area moved eastward and normal temperatures returned.

But not for long. On the twenty-first another zone of frigid temperature came drifting in on the Westerlies, and the English and Continental papers, carefully filed at the Congressional Library, began to betray a note of panic. Ted read the editorial comments avidly: of course Sir Phineas Grey was crazy; of course he was—but just suppose he were right. Just suppose he were. Wasn't it unthinkable that the safety and majesty of Germany (or France or England or Belgium, depending on the particular capital whence the paper came) was subject to the disturbances of a little strip of land seven thousand miles away? Germany (or France, *et al*) must control its own destiny.

With the third wave of Arctic cold, the tone became openly

fearful. Perhaps Sir Phineas *was* right. What then? What was to be done? There were rumblings and mutterings in Paris and Berlin, and even staid Oslo witnessed a riot, and conservative London as well. Ted began to realize that Asa Gaunt's predictions were founded on keen judgment; the German government made an openly friendly gesture toward France in the delicate matter of the Polish Corridor, and France reciprocated with an indulgent note on the Saar payments. Russia protested and was politely ignored; Europe was definitely realigning itself, and in desperate haste.

But America, save for a harassed group in Washington, had only casual interest in the matter. When reports of suffering among the poor began to come during the first week in February, a drive was launched to provide relief funds, but it met with only nominal success. People just weren't interested; a cold winter lacked the dramatic power of a flood, a fire, or an earthquake. But the papers reported in increasing anxiety that the immigration quotas, unapproached for a half a dozen years, were full again; there was the beginning of an exodus from the Gulf Stream countries.

By the second week in February stark panic had gripped Europe, and echoes of it began to penetrate even self-sufficient

America. The realignment of the Powers was definite and open now, and Spain, Italy, the Balkans, and Russia found themselves herded together, facing an ominous thunderhead on the north and west. Russia instantly forgot her long-standing quarrel with Japan, and Japan, with a protective eye on the plains of Manchoukuo, was willing enough to forget her own grievances. There was a strange shifting of sympathies; the nations which possessed large and thinly populated areas—Russia, the United States, Mexico, and all of South America—were glaring back at a frantic Europe that awaited only the release of summer to launch a greater invasion than any history had recorded. Attila and his horde of Huns—the Mongol waves that beat down on China—even the vast movements of the white race into North and South America—all these were but minor migrations to that which threatened now. Two hundred million people, backed by colossal fighting power, glaring panic-stricken at the empty places of the world. No one knew where the thunderbolt would strike first, but that it would strike beyond doubt.

While Europe shivered in the grip of an incredible winter, Ted shivered at the thought of certain personal problems of his own. The frantic world found an

echo in his own situation, for here was he, America in miniature, and there was Kay Lovell, a small edition of Britannia. Their sympathies clashed like those of their respective nations.

The time for secrecy was over. Ted faced Kay before the fireplace in her home and stared from her face to the cheery fire, whose brightness merely accentuated his gloom.

"Yeah," he admitted. "I knew about it. I've known about it since a couple of days after the Isthmus earthquake."

"Then why didn't you tell me? You should have."

"Couldn't. I swore not to tell."

"It isn't fair!" blazed Kay. "Why should it fall on England? I tell you it sickens me even to think of Mercroft standing there in snow, like some old Norse tower. I was *born* in Warwickshire, Ted, and so was my father, and his father, and *his*, and all of us back to the time of William the Conqueror. Do you think it's a pleasant thing to think of my mother's rose garden as barren as—as a tundra?"

"I'm sorry," said Ted gently, "but what can I—or anyone—do about it? I'm just glad you're here on this side of the Atlantic, where you're safe."

"Safe!" she flashed. "Yes, I'm safe, but what about my people? I'm safe because I'm in America, the lucky country, the chosen land! Why did this have to hap-

pen to England? The Gulf Stream washes your shores too. Why aren't Americans shivering and freezing and frightened and hopeless, instead of being warm and comfortable and indifferent? Is *that* fair?"

"The Gulf Stream," he explained miserably, "doesn't affect our climate so definitely because in the first place we're much farther south than Europe and in the second place our prevailing winds are from the west, just as England's. But our winds blow from the land to the Gulf Stream, and England's from the Gulf Stream to the land."

"But it's not fair! It's not fair!"

"Can I help it, Kay?"

"Oh, I suppose not," she agreed in suddenly weary tones, and then, with a resurgence of anger, "But your people can do something about it! Look here! Listen to this!"

She seized a week-old copy of the *London Times*, fingered rapidly through it, and turned on Ted. "Listen—just listen! 'And in the name of humanity it is not asking too much to insist that our sister nation open her gates to us. Let us settle the vast areas where now only Indian tribes hunt and buffalo range. We would not be the only ones to gain by such a settlement, for we would bring to the new country a sane, industrious, law-abiding citizenry, no harborers of highwaymen and gangsters—a point well worth

considering. We would bring a great new purchasing public for American manufacturers, carrying with us all our portable wealth. And finally, we would provide a host of eager defenders in the war for territory, a war that now seems inevitable. Our language is one with theirs; surely this is the logical solution, especially when one remembers that the state of Texas alone contains land enough to supply two acres to every man, woman, and child on earth!" She paused and stared defiantly at Ted. "Well?"

He snorted. "Indians and buffalo!" he snapped. "Have *you* seen either one in the United States?"

"No, but—"

"And as for Texas, *sure* there's enough land there for two acres to everybody in the world, but why didn't your editor mention that two acres won't even support a cow over much of it? The Llano Estacado's nothing but an alkali desert, and there's a scarcity of water in lots of the rest of it. On that argument, you ought to move to Greenland; I'll bet there's land enough there for *six* acres per person!"

"That may be true, but—"

"And as for a great new purchasing public, your portable wealth is gold and paper money, isn't it? The gold's all right, but what good is a pound if there's no British credit to back it? Your great new public would simply

swell the ranks of the unemployed until American industry could absorb them, which might take years! And meanwhile wages would go down to nothing because of an enormous surplus of labor, and food and rent would go skyhigh because of millions of extra stomachs to feed and bodies to shelter."

"All right!" said Kay bleakly. "Argue all you wish, I'll even concede that your arguments are right, but there's one thing I *know* is wrong, and that's leaving fifty million English people to starve and freeze and suffer in a country that's been moved, as far as climate goes, to the North Pole. Why, you even get excited over a newspaper story about one poor family in an unheated hovel! Then what about a whole nation whose furnace has gone out,"

"What," countered Ted grimly, "about the seven or eight other nations whose furnaces have also gone out?"

"But England deserves priority!" she blazed. "You took your language from us, your literature, your laws, your whole civilization. Why, even now you ought to be nothing but an English colony! That's all you *are*, if you want the truth!"

"We think differently. Anyway, you know as well as I that the United States can't open the door to one nation and exclude the others. It must be all or none,

and that really means—none!”

“And *that* means war,” she said bitterly. “Oh, Ted! I can’t help the way I feel. I have people over there—aunts, cousins, friends. Do you think I can stand indifferently aside while they’re ruined?—Although they’re ruined already, as far as that goes. Land’s already dropped to nothing there. You can’t sell it at any price now.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Kay, but it’s no one’s fault. No one’s to blame.”

“And so no one needs to do anything about it, I suppose. Is that your nice American theory?”

“You know that isn’t fair? What *can* we do?”

“You could let us in! As it is we’ll have to fight our way in, and you can’t blame us!”

“Kay, no nation and no group of nations can invade this country. Even if our navy were utterly destroyed, how far from the sea do you think a hostile army could march? It would be Napoleon in Russia all over again; your army marches in and is swallowed up. And where is Europe going to find the food to support an invading army? Do you think it could live on the land as it moved? I tell you no sane nation would try that!”

“No *sane* nation perhaps!” she retorted fiercely. “Do you think you’re dealing with sane nations?”

He shrugged gloomily.

“They’re desperate!” she went on. “I don’t blame them. Whatever they do, you’ve brought it on yourselves. Now you’ll be fighting *all* of Europe, when you *could* have the British navy on your side. It’s stupid. It’s worse than stupid; it’s selfish!”

“Kay,” he said miserably. “I can’t argue with you. I know how you feel, and I know it’s a hell of a situation. But even if I agreed with everything you’ve said—which I don’t—what could I do about it? I’m not the President and I’m not Congress. Let’s drop the argument for this evening, honey; it’s just making you unhappy.”

“Unhappy! As if I could ever be anything else when everything I value, everything I love, is doomed to be buried under Arctic snow.”

“Everything, Kay,” he asked gently. “Haven’t you forgotten that there’s something for you on this side of the Atlantic as well?”

“I haven’t forgotten anything,” she said coldly. “I said everything, and I mean it. America! I *hate* America. Yes, and I hate Americans too!”

“Kay!”

“And what’s more,” she blazed, “I wouldn’t marry an American if he—if he could rebuild the Isthmus! If England’s to freeze, I’ll freeze with her, and if England’s to fight, her enemies are mine!”

She rose suddenly to her feet,

deliberately averted her eyes from his troubled face, and stalked out of the room.

Sometimes, during those hectic weeks in February, Ted wormed his way into the Visitor's Gallery in one or the other Congressional house. The outgoing seventy-ninth Congress, due to stand for re-election in the fall, was the focal point of the dawning hysteria in the nation, and was battling sensationally through its closing session. Routine matters were ignored, and day after day found both houses considering the unprecedented emergency with a sort of appalled inability to act in any effective unison. Freak bills of all description were read, considered, tabled, reconsidered, put to a second reading, and tabled again. The hard-money boom of '42 had swept in a Conservative majority in the off-year elections, but they had no real policy to offer, and the proposals of the minority group of Laborites and Leftists were voted down without substitutes being suggested.

Some of the weirdest bills in all the weird annals of Congress appeared at this time. Ted listened in fascination to the Leftist proposal that each American family adopt two Europeans, splitting its income into thirds; to a suggestion that Continentals be advised to undergo voluntary sterilization, thus restraining the

emergency to the time of one generation; to a fantastic paper money scheme of the Senator from the new state of Alaska, that was to provide a magic formula to permit Europe to purchase its livelihood without impoverishing the rest of the world. There were suggestions of outright relief, but the problem of charity to two hundred million people was so obviously staggering that this proposal at least received little attention. But there were certain bills that passed both houses without debate, gaining the votes of Leftists, Laborites, and Conservatives alike; these were the grim appropriations for submarines, and aircraft-carriers.

Those were strange, hectic days in Washington. Outwardly there was still the same gay society that gathers like froth around all great capitals, and Ted, of course, being young and decidedly not unattractive, received his full share of invitations. But not even the least sensitive could have overlooked the dark undercurrents of hysteria that flowed so little a way beneath the surface. There was dancing, there was gay dinner conversation, there was laughter, but beneath all of it was fear. Ted was not the only one to notice that the diplomatic representatives of the Gulf Stream countries were conspicuous by their absence from all affairs save those of such importance that their presence was

a matter of policy. And even then, incidents occurred; he was present when the Minister from France stalked angrily from the room because some hostess had betrayed the poor taste of permitting her dance orchestra to play a certain popular number called "The Gulf Stream Blues." Newspapers carefully refrained from mentioning the occurrence, but Washington buzzed with it for days.

Ted looked in vain for Kay. Her father appeared when appearance was necessary, but Ted had not seen the girl since her abrupt dismissal of him, and in reply to his inquiries, Sir Joshua granted only the gruff and double-edged explanation that she was "indisposed." So Ted worried and fumed about her in vain, until he scarcely knew whether his own situation or that of the world was more important. In the last analysis, of course, the two were one and the same.

The world was like a crystal of nitrogen iodide, waiting only the drying out of summer to explode. Strict censorship had veiled what was happening in Germany, but the news darting on wire and ether wave from the other countries was more than alarming. Under its frozen surface Europe was seething like Mounts Erebus and Terror that blaze in the ice of Antarctica. Little Hungary had massed its army on the west,

beyond doubt to oppose a similar massing on the part of the Anschluss. Of this particular report, Ted heard Maxwell say with an air of relief that it indicated that Germany had turned her face inland; it meant one less potential enemy for America.

But the maritime nations were another story, and especially mighty Britain, whose world-girdling fleet was gathering day by day in the Atlantic. That was a crowded ocean indeed, for on its westward shore was massed the American battle fleet, built at last to treaty strength, and building even beyond it, while north and south plied every vessel that could raise a pound of steam, bearing thosefortunates who could leave their European homes to whatever lands hope called them. Africa and Australia, wherever Europe had colonies, were receiving an unheard of stream of immigrants. But this stream was actually only the merest trickle, composed of those who possessed sufficient liquid wealth to encompass the journey. Untold millions remained chained to their homes, bound by the possession of unsalable lands, or by investments in business, or by sentiment, or by the simple lack of sufficient funds to buy passage for families. And throughout all of the afflicted countries were those who clung stubbornly to hope, who believed even in the grip of that unbelievable winter

that the danger would pass, and that things would come right in the end.

Blunt, straightforward little Holland was the first nation to propose openly a wholesale transfer of population. Ted read the note, or at least the version of it given the press on February 21st. In substance it simply repeated the arguments Kay had read from the London paper—the plea to humanity, the affirmation of an honest and industrious citizenry, and the appeal to the friendship that had always existed between the two nations; and the communication closed with a request for an immediate reply because of “the urgency of the situation.” And an immediate reply was forthcoming.

This was also given to the press. In suave and very polished diplomatic language it pointed out that the United States could hardly admit nationals of one country while excluding those of others. Under the terms of the National Origins Act, Dutch immigrants would be welcomed to the full extent of their quota. It was even possible that the quota might be increased, but it was not conceivable that it could be removed entirely. The note was in effect a suave, dignified, diplomatic No.

March drifted in on a southwest wind. In the Southern states it brought spring, and in Washing-

ton a fair forerunner of balmy weather to come, but to the Gulf Stream countries it brought no release from the Arctic winter that had fallen on them with its icy mantle. Only in the Basque country of Southern France, where vagrant winds slipped at intervals across the Pyrenees with the warm breath of the deflected Stream, was there any sign of the relaxing of that frigid clutch. But that was a promise; April would come, and May—and the world flexed its steel muscles for war.

Everyone knew now that war threatened. After the first few notes and replies, no more were released to the press, but everyone knew that notes, representations, and communiqués were flying between the powers like a flurry of white doves, and everyone knew, at least in Washington, that the tenor of these notes was no longer dove-like. Now they carried brusque demands and blunt refusals.

Ted knew as much of the situation as any alert observer, but no more. He and Asa Gaunt discussed it endlessly, but the dry Texan, having made his predictions and seen them verified, was no longer in the middle of the turmoil, for his bureau had, of course, nothing to do with the affair now. So the Geological Survey staggered on under a woe-fully reduced appropriation, a handicap shared by every other

governmental function that had no direct bearing on defense.

All the American countries, and for that matter, every nation save those in Western Europe, were enjoying a feverish, abnormal, hectic boom. The flight of capital from Europe, and the incessant, avid, frantic cry for food, had created a rush of business, and exports mounted unbelievably. In this emergency, France and the nations under her hegemony, those who had clung so stubbornly to gold ever since the second revaluation of the franc in 1938, were now at a marked advantage, since their money would buy more wheat, more cattle, and more coal. But the paper countries, especially Britain, shivered and froze in stone cottage and draughty manor alike.

On the eleventh of March, that memorable Tuesday when the thermometer touched twenty-eight below in London, Ted reached a decision toward which he had been struggling for six weeks. He was going to swallow his pride and see Kay again. Washington was buzzing with rumors that Sir Joshua was to be recalled, that diplomatic relations with England were to be broken as they had already been broken with France. The entire nation moved about its daily business in an air of tense expectancy, for the break with France meant little in view of that country's negligible sea power, but now, if the

colossus of the British navy were to align itself with the French army—This was also the day on which the President replied with open friendliness to Japan's amicable message; the plains of Manchukuo, so long a troublesome issue, became now a bond of common sympathy.

But what troubled Ted was a much more personal problem. If Sir Joshua Lovell were recalled to London, that meant that Kay would accompany him, and once she were caught in the frozen Hell of Europe, he had a panicky feeling that she was lost to him forever. When war broke, as it surely must, there would go his last hope of ever seeing her again. Europe, apparently, was doomed, for it seemed impossible that any successful invasion could be carried on over thousands of miles of ocean, but if he could save the one fragment of Europe that meant everything to him, if he could somehow save Kay Lovell, it was worth the sacrifice of pride or of anything else. So he called one final time on the telephone, received the same response from an unfriendly maid, and then left the almost idle office and drove directly to her home.

The same maid answered his ring. "Miss Lovell is not in," she said coldly. "I told you that when you telephoned."

"I'll wait," returned Ted grimly, and thrust himself through

the door. He seated himself stolidly in the hall, glared back at the maid, and waited. It was no more than five minutes before Kay herself appeared, coming down the steps.

"I wish you'd leave," she said. She was pallid and troubled, and he felt a great surge of sympathy.

"I won't leave."

"What do I have to do to make you go away? I don't want to see you, Ted."

"If you'll talk to me just half an hour, I'll go." She yielded listlessly, leading the way into the living room where a fire still crackled in cheerful irony. "Well?" she asked.

"Kay, do you love me?"

"I—No, I don't!"

"Kay," he persisted gently, "do you love me enough to marry me and stay here where you're safe?"

Tears glistened suddenly in her brown eyes. "I hate you," she said. "I hate all of you. You're a nation of murderers. You're like the East Indian Thugs, only they call murder religion and you call it patriotism."

"I won't even argue with you, Kay. I can't blame you for your viewpoint, and I can't blame you for not understanding mine. But—*do you love me?*"

"All right," she said in sudden weariness. "I do."

"And will you marry me?"

"No. No, I won't marry you,

Ted. I'm going back to England."

"Then will you marry me first? I'll let you go back, Kay, but afterwards—if there's any world left after what's coming—I could bring you back here. I'll have to fight for what I believe in, and I won't ask you to stay with me during the time our nations are enemies, but afterwards, Kay—if you're my wife I could bring you here. Don't you see?"

"I see, but—no."

"Why, Kay? You said you loved me."

"I do," she said almost bitterly. "I wish I didn't, because I can't marry you hating your people the way I do. If you were on my side, Ted, I swear I'd marry you tomorrow, or today, or five minutes from now—but as it is, I can't. It just wouldn't be fair."

"You'd not want me to turn traitor," he responded gloomily. "One thing I'm sure of, Kay, is that you couldn't love a traitor." He paused. "Is it goodbye, then?"

"Yes." There were tears in her eyes again. "It isn't public yet, but father has been recalled. Tomorrow he presents his recall to the Secretary of State, and the day after we leave for England. This is goodbye."

"That *does* mean war!" he muttered. "I've been hoping that in spite of everything—God knows I'm sorry, Kay. I don't blame you for the way you feel. You couldn't feel differently and

still be Kay Lovell, but — it's damned hard!"

She agreed silently. After a moment she said, "Think of my part of it, Ted—going back to a home that's like—well, the Rockefeller Mountains in Antarctica. I tell you, I'd rather it had been England that sunk into the sea! That would have been easier, much easier than this. If it had sunk until the wave rolled over the very peak of Ben Macduhl—" She broke off.

"The waves are rolling over higher peaks than Ben Macduhl," he responded drearily. "They're—" Suddenly he paused, staring at Kay with his jaw dropping and a wild light in his eyes!

"The Sierra Madre!" he bellowed, in such a roaring voice that the girl shrank away. "The Mother range! The Sierra Madre! The Sierra Madre!"

"Wh, what?" she gasped.

"The Sierra—! Listen to me, Kay! Listen to me! Do you trust me? Will you do something—something for both of us? Us? I mean for the world! Will you?"

"I—I—"

"I know you will! Kay, keep your father from presenting his recall! Keep him here another ten days—even another week. Can you?"

"How? How can I?"

"I don't know. Any way at all. Get sick. Get too sick to travel, and beg him not to present his papers until you can leave. Or—

or tell him that the United States will make his country an alternate proposal in a few days. That's the truth. I swear that's true, Kay."

"But—but he won't believe me!"

"He's got to! I don't care how you do it, but *keep him here!* And have him report to the Foreign Office that new developments—vastly important developments—have come up. That's true, Kay."

"True? Then what are they?"

"There isn't time to explain. Will you do what I ask?"

"I—I'll try."

"You're—well you're marvelous!" he said huskily. He stared into her tragic brown eyes, kissed her lightly and rushed away.

Asa Gaunt was scowling down at a map of the dead Salton Sea when Ted dashed unannounced into his office. The rangy Texan looked up with a dry smile at the unceremonious entry.

"I've got it!" yelled Ted.

"A bad case of it," agreed Asa Gaunt, "What's the diagnosis?"

"No, I mean—Say, has the Survey taken soundings over the Isthmus?"

"The *Dolphin's* been there for weeks," said the older man. "You know you can't map forty thousand square miles of ocean bed during the lunch hour."

"Where," shouted Ted, "are they sounding?"

"Over Pearl Cay Point, Bluefields, Monkey Point, and San Juan del Norte, of course. Naturally they'll sound the places where there were cities first of all."

"Oh, naturally!" said Ted, suppressing his voice to a tense quiver. "And where is the *Marlin*?"

"Idle at Newport News. We can't operate both of them under this year's budget."

"To hell with the budget!" flared Ted. "Get the *Marlin* there too, and any other vessel that can carry an electric plumb!"

"Yes, sir—right away, sir," said Asa Gaunt dryly. "When did you relieve Golsborough as Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Welling?"

"I'm sorry," replied Ted. "I'm not giving orders, but I've thought of something. Something that may get all of us out of this mess we're in."

"Indeed? Sounds mildly interesting. Is is another of these international fiat-money schemes?"

"No!" blazed Ted. "It's the Sierra Madre! Don't you see?"

"In words of one syllable, no."

"Then listen! I've flown over every square mile of the sunken territory. I've mapped it and photographed it, and I've laid out geodetics. I *know* that buried strip of land as well as I know the humps and hollows in my own bed."

"Congratulations, but what of it?"

"This!" snapped Ted. He turned

to the wall, pulled down the topographical map of Central America, and began to speak. After a while Asa Gaunt leaned forward in his chair and a queer light gathered in his pale blue eyes.

What follows has been recorded and interpreted in a hundred ways by numberless historians. The story of the voyages of the *Dolphin* and the *Marlin*, sounding in frantic haste the course of the submerged Cordilleras, is in itself romance of the first order. The secret story of diplomacy, the holding of Britain's neutrality so that the lesser seapowers dared not declare war across three thousand miles of ocean, is another romance that will never be told openly. But the most fascinating story of all, the building of the Cordilleran Inter-continental Wall, has been told so often that it needs little comment.

The soundings traced the irregular course of the sunken Sierra Madre mountains. Ted's guess was justified; the peaks of the range were not inaccessibly far below the surface. A route was found where the Equatorial Counter Current swept over them with a depth at no point greater than forty fathoms, and the building of the Wall began on March the 31st, began in frantic haste, for the task utterly dwarfed the digging of the abandoned Canal

itself. By the end of September some two hundred miles had been raised to sea-level, a mighty rampart seventy-five feet broad at its narrowest point, and with an extreme height of two hundred and forty feet and an average of ninety.

There was still almost half to be completed when winter swept out of the north over a frightened Europe, but the half that had been built was the critical sector. On one side washed the Counter Current, on the other the Equatorial Drift, bound to join the Gulf Stream in its slow march toward Europe. And the mighty Stream, traced by a hundred oceanographic vessels, veered slowly northward again, and bathed first the shores of France, then of England, and finally of the high northern Scandinavian Peninsula. Winter came drifting in as mildly as of old, and a sigh of relief went up from every nation in the world.

Ostensibly the Cordilleran Intercontinental Wall was constructed by the United States. A good many of the more chauvinistic newspapers bewailed the appearance of Uncle Sam as a sucker again, paying for the five hundred million dollar project for the benefit of Europe. No one noticed that there was no Congressional appropriation for the purpose, nor has anyone since wondered why the British naval bases on Trinidad, Jamaica,

and at Belize have harbored so large a portion of His Majesty's Atlantic Fleet. Nor, for that matter, has anyone inquired why the war debts, dead for a quarter of a century, were so suddenly exhumed and settled so cheerfully by the European powers.

A few historians and economists may suspect. The truth is that the Cordilleran Intercontinental Wall has given the United States a world hegemony, in fact almost a world empire. From the south tip of Texas, from Florida, From Porto Rico, and from the otherwise useless Canal Zone, a thousand American planes could bomb the Wall into ruin. No European nation dares risk that.

Moreover, no nation in the world, not even in the Orient where the Gulf Stream has no climatic influence, dares threaten war on America. If Japan, for instance, should so much as speak a hostile word, the whole military might of Europe would turn against her. Europe simply cannot risk an attack on the Wall, and certainly the first effort of a nation at war with the United States would be to force a passage through the Wall.

In effect the United States can command the armies of Europe with a few bombing planes, though not even the most ardent pacifists have yet suggested that experiment. But such are the results of the barrier officially known as the Cordilleran Inter-

continental Wall, but called by every newspaper after its originator, the Welling Wall.

It was mid-summer before Ted had time enough to consider marriage and a honeymoon. He and Kay spent the latter on the Caribbean, cruising that treacherous sea in a sturdy fifty-foot sloop lent for the occasion by Asa Gaunt and the Geological Survey. They spent a good share of the time watching the great dredges and construction vessels working desperately at the task of adding millions of cubic yards to the peaks of the submarine range that was once the Sierra Madre. And one day as they lay on the deck in swimming suits, bent on acquiring a tropical tan, Ted asked her a question.

"By the way," he began, "you've never told me how you managed to keep Sir Joshua in the States. That stalled off war just long enough for this thing to be worked out and presented. How'd you do it?"

Kay dimpled. "Oh, first I tried to tell him I was sick. I got desperately sick."

"I knew he'd fall for that."

"But he didn't. He said a sea voyage would help me."

"Then—what *did* you do?"

"Well, you see he has a sort of idiosyncrasy toward quinine. Ever since his service in India, where he had to take it day after

day, he develops what doctors call a quinine rash, and he hasn't taken any for years."

"Well?"

"Don't you see? His before-dinner cocktail had a little quinine in it, and so did his wine, and so did his tea, and the sugar and the salt. He kept complaining that everything he ate tasted bitter to him, and I convinced him that it was due to his indigestion."

"And then?"

"Why, then I brought him one of his indigestion capsules, only it didn't have his medicine in it. I had a nice dose of quinine, and in two hours he was pink as a salmon, and so itchy he couldn't sit still!"

Ted began to laugh. "Don't tell me *that* kept him there?"

"Not that alone," said Kay demurely. "I made him call in a doctor, a friend of mine who—well, who kept asking me to marry him—and I sort of bribed him to tell father he had—I think it was erysipelas he called it. Something violently contagious, anyway."

"And so—?"

"And so we were quarantined for two weeks! And I kept feeding father quinine to keep up the bluff, and—well, we were very strictly quarantined. He just couldn't present his recall!"

The End

JUDSON'S ANNIHILATOR

JOHN BEYNON

Illustrated by HUGO WOLFE

Like the late Henry Kuttner—master of the pseudonym—John Beynon Harris has managed to make at least three of his own pen names even better known than his real name. In the early thirties it was John B. Harris, whose first story—"The Lost Machine"—turned out to be a robot tale ahead of its time. Recently it's been John Wyndham, world famous for major novels like Re-Birth and Out of the Deep. And in between—circa 1939—it was John Beynon, author of unpredictable s-f such as the following—which may begin with an Ultimate weapon but certainly doesn't end with one.

MAJOR-GENERAL Stalham finished the kidneys and bacon and got down to the toast and marmalade. His nephew watched him patiently from the other side of the table.

"More coffee, Uncle?" he suggested.

The Major-General hauled in his faculties from a long distance.

"Er—yes, thank you. Wish I could get coffee like this at home. No good. I've tried. No idea." He drank and lapsed into silence again until the meal was finished. Then, with the first cigarette of the day between his lips, he became more sociable.

"Where's your friend?" he inquired.

"Judson?" answered Martin. "Oh, he's outside, fiddling with his contraption, I fancy."

The Major-General gave a half smile.

"So you really think there's something in it?"

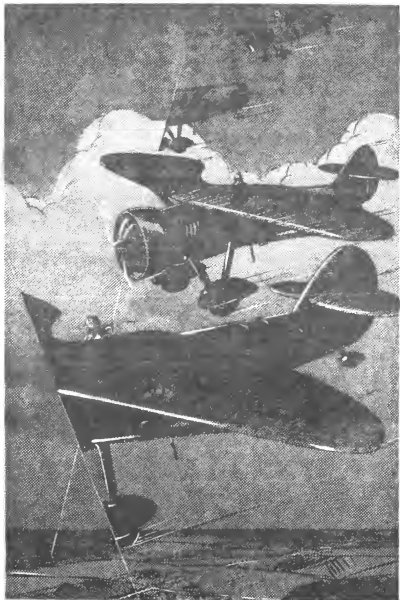
"That's for you to say, sir."

The soldier nodded, and got up from the table.

"May as well go out to the lawn and see if he's ready now," he said, leading the way.

When they arrived Judson was bending attentively over a trapezoid black box mounted upon four

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well splayed legs. From beneath the box two cables emerged to curl away over the grass like thick black worms, in the direction of the stables. About ten yards further away lay a miscellaneous pile of broken bricks, pieces of wood, and odds and ends of metal, grotesquely out of place on the carpet like lawn.

Judson straightened up as they approached. He was a tall, thin man of thirty of the type which always looks slightly untidy in limbs and clothes despite the most careful efforts at control. In his case the effect was enhanced by thick fair hair which nothing could keep in permanent subjection. Both his long thin face and his pale blue eyes showed a trace of anxiety as he raised them; it was possible that the War Office man might resent being forced to watch a demonstration under such conditions. But his expression cleared when he saw that the other was genial and interested.

"How about it? Ready for us?" the Major-General inquired.

"Yes, sir. It's ready now."

"Good. Where'd you want us to stand? What sort of range has this death-ray of yours got?"

"It's not a death ray, sir. It's an annihilating screen. This particular machine has a range of a hundred feet over an angle of ninety degrees and is directed vertically upward. If you imagine a

large fan, a hundred feet in length and extended to a quarter circle, balanced on its point on this box, that will give you the idea of its field of influence. Actually this is a kind of toy model. It is just as effective as the big one within its range, but the range is small."

The soldier looked curiously at the box. There was not much to see externally save a switch or two. He noticed a slot, six inches by perhaps half an inch, in the top casing; within it was a gleam of glass.

"And the thickness of this 'fan'? The fore and aft spread, so to speak?" he inquired.

"Very little, sir. It is projected at the thickness of half an inch. My tests have shown an increase of about 1/64th of an inch at a hundred feet."

"You mean that it has absolutely no influence beyond that half inch thick quarter circle?"

"I have discovered none yet, sir. All the same, it is advisable to stand well clear while it is on. I mean, if one were to make a careless movement—"

"Yes, yes, of course. Where do you want us to stand?"

By Judson's advice they moved ten yards or so toward the house; the side opposite from himself and his pile of rubbish. Judson nodded.

"That's it. Now please don't

come any nearer until I have shut off the machine again."

"All right, my boy. We're not fools," said the soldier, testily.

"Sorry, sir. But it really is dangerous though it looks innocent. Here goes, then."

He walked back a few steps, holding a switch attached to a cable. At the full extent of the cable he pressed the switch and dropped it on the grass. A red bulb lighted on top of the box.

"It's on now," he said.

Major-General Stalham felt disappointed. He had not known what to expect, but he was aware that he had counted on some visible or audible manifestation. There was nothing save the red light and the young man's claim that the machine was "on."

Judson walked back to his pile of rubbish and picked up a stone. He faced them across the machine, and drew back his arm.

"Catch," he shouted, flinging the stone toward them.

The soldier instinctively put out his hands to receive it, but the stone did not arrive.

Halfway on its journey, exactly over the machine, it vanished.

Judson chuckled.

"Try again," he said, and lobbed over half a brick. It sailed through the air, but at the top of its curve it just ceased to be.

The general grunted and stared. "Stone," said Judson, and threw a flint out of existence. He fol-

lowed it up with a piece of wood and then metal in the form of an iron bar.

The soldier blinked. He had a hazy suspicion that he was being fooled by some kind of conjuring trick. Had he been able to see the emanations from the machine, or a flash or a bang it would have been less outrageous. Somehow the very neatness and cleanness of the operation encouraged his suspicion.

He and Martin, carefully keeping their distance, walked round to the side to observe the effect from there. It was even more odd to follow the parabola of a flying tin can and see it uncompleted because the can had winked out of existence.

Judson switched off the machine and tossed half a brick over it; it fell with a thud. He switched on once more; a similar half brick never fell.

"This is remarkable," said the general, though even his cautious nature felt that the words were a trifle inadequate.

Martin left his side and hurried into the house. He was back in a few minutes carrying a twelve-bore and a box of cartridges.

"Here you are," he said, handing them over.

A piece of notepaper was pinned to a pair of steps set up on one side of the machine; General Stalham took up a position on the other. He let the paper

have the choke barrel and blew the middle out of it. Judson set up another piece of paper and waited until he had reloaded.

"Now try again," he said, as he pressed the switch.

The general let it have left and then right. He lowered the gun, and stared incredulously at the unharmed paper.

"Wait a minute," he called, and hurriedly reloaded.

Again he fired both barrels in quick succession; still there was no mark on the paper. An expression of real awe came over his face. His voice was uncertain as he spoke.

"My God, Judson, what have you found?"

Chapter II

The Power of the Annihilator

"You two remember one another, don't you?" said Judson, casually.

Martin found himself shaking hands with a serene young woman in whom it was difficult to recognize the schoolgirl Sheilah Judson of a few years ago.

It was ten days since the demonstration to his uncle, but a rush of business had intervened, making it impossible for him to call at Judson's house until now.

Sheilah was thanking him for helping her brother.

"It wasn't much," he told her.

"Juddy really had the whole

scheme cut and dried; all I had to do was to be a yes-man. Considering what he had to show, the whole thing was a foregone conclusion. What I want to know is how yesterday's demonstration went. Sorry I couldn't be there, but I had to go over to Paris."

"I think it shook 'em a bit," Judson admitted.

Sheilah laughed. "You know him, Martin, most of his swans are geese. Shook them, indeed! I should say so. I've never seen a body of men so dumbfounded and knocked endways as they were when it had finished. I doubt whether they're really believing their own senses yet. Tell him about it, Tommy."

Judson, fishing in the cupboard for beer bottles, landed his catch, and turned round.

"Sheilah's right," he admitted.

"I wish you'd been there to see. They sent an army lorry and a squad of men. We loaded the big thousand yard brute aboard and the little one too, in case of accidents. I mean, the big one had never been tried out properly—it's not the kind of thing you can fool about with in the back yard. "We followed in style in a staff car to the site of the demonstration; a particularly desolate stretch of the Plain, a few miles beyond the camp. The exact position of the machine and its danger area were marked out, and power lines had been run

out there all ready for us.

"It didn't take long to open the cases and get the bigger machine assembled. And after we'd connected up to the mains there was nothing to do but hang about and wait for the nob's to arrive. They turned up in a whole covey of staff cars about eleven-thirty.

"Your respected uncle was well in evidence, as jumpy as a flea on a hot plate. I don't know quite what the old boy had been telling them, but he was as nervous as hell lest the whole thing should be a flop—it must have been a good yard to have got the demonstration arranged so soon. The rest weren't much excited. They drifted up and sniffed round the machine as if it had a bad smell—they might have been more impressed if I'd painted it khaki.

"The show was timed to begin at twelve. About a quarter to they started telephoning to clear the course, running up danger flags, sounding bugles and all the rest of it. At twelve a lesser officer announced to a greater officer that all was clear—it had been perfectly clear for a couple of miles each way all the morning, but now it was technically clear. Then—oh, I forgot to tell you there'd been one or two lorries, a small field gun and some other things drafted up in the course of the morning; they were parked at a respectful

distance. Well, then the big noise—he was a Field Marshall, and that speaks well for your uncle's pull, told me to go ahead.

"He and his satellites moved off a bit, so I tagged along too, trailing the switch cable behind me. When they came to anchor I pressed the switch, and the red warning light went on. The bigger machine sets up a semi-circular screen, covering the whole hundred and eighty degrees from side to side.

"'Well, what are you waiting for?' the old boy said, shortly.

"'Nothing, sir,' I said, nicely and politely. 'The screen's up; it's for your men to test the resistance of the field.' And I explained to him that the game was to get anything past the machine within a thousand yards to either side, but not to go for the machine itself as it wasn't protected at present. He just grunted and gave some orders.

Out on the left six men marched up to a line about twenty yards from the screen. Their timing was perfect. Six pins were drawn, six arms swung over, and six little black bombs sailed away."

Judson chuckled.

"I wish you could have seen the staff's faces when the bombs vanished—the look of relief on your uncle's face was nearly as good. The rest of them stared after the bombs, then they stared

at me, and then again at the place where the bombs should have burst. There was a faint thudding noise far away in the distance if you listened for it, but no sign of an explosion. The Field Marshall pulled himself together and ordered another bomb salvo. Of course that lot vanished too. Some of the staff began to look at me pretty queerly.

"Well, there's no need to go into all the details. They went through a whole armory of weapons. They put machine guns on it with ordinary and tracer bullets, they pumped shells at it, tried flame throwers and all sorts. Some young fool even wanted to drive a tank at it; I was arguing with him with the accident occurred.

"There was a shout somewhere, and I turned round to see people pointing out to the right. A man was sawing away at the mouth of a bolting horse which was carrying him hell for leather at the screen. Everybody yelled at him to jump clear. I was a hundred yards from the switch then for we'd had to move back when the field gun got to work. I sprinted my best for it, but I was no more than halfway there when the horse and rider ran clean into the screen and vanished. I reached the switch and turned it off. Then I walked back.

"I arrived in a funny sort of silence. It was as if they had only

just realized what the screen meant. The man who had suggested the tank idea looked particularly sick. The rest kept glancing over the plain as if they expected the horseman to reappear suddenly somewhere. We all walked down to the spot where he had disappeared. The hoof-marks were plain up to the screen line—there they stopped dead.

"The Old Field Marshal turned and looked at me. He stood quite a time without speaking. Then he said:

"'God forgive you, boy, for what you may have begun.'

"He turned away and went slowly back to his car. He didn't seem to see us or anything about him."

Judson paused. In a different tone he added:

"Well, then it was all over. We packed up and came home."

"And now?" Martin asked.

"Today, I've been down at the War Office, talking for hours. It looks as if I shall be having a busy time for a bit. Curious men," he added, reflectively, "they tested it yesterday with most things short of big guns—we shall be floating it on a raft and testing out big naval guns against it next week, by the way—what really impressed them, you know, was that man on the horse. It got 'em; meant more than all the rest. Nice, simple minded fellows."

"I can understand that," Martin said. But, tell me, Juddy, what actually does happen? I there may be a form of radiation that shakes things to bits—a kind of disintegrating wavelength—but it ought to vary with different substances, and there ought to be some kind of residue even if it's only dust in the air. Or I could understand one that would incinerate immediately, but there again there ought to be a residue—certainly of metal—and there ought to be the dickens of a detonation in the case of explosives touching it. As far as I can see it's against nature and science and everything else for things to cease to exist when they hit your screen. The most that can happen to them is that they are changed into something else: a gas, for instance. What actually does happen?"

Judson lifted his face out of his tankard, and shook his head.

"That's where you've got me, old boy. And that's a point the War Office people have been hammering at half the day. They can't believe, though I've told them till I'm blue in the face, that I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"Exactly. I have got hold of a force, but I don't know what that force is. It's another manifestation of the power of electricity. Radio is one, X-ray is another, and heaven knows how

many others are waiting to be discovered. All I have found out—and to be frank it was half by accident—is that if you do certain things with an electric current you produce this result."

"Do you mean to say you've no idea what happens to, say, a brick when you chuck it into the screen?"

"I do," he admitted, "though we don't know a great deal yet, we're learning by degrees. For instance, Sheilah noticed on one of the early trials that it acts as a windshield. And there are funny things about sound. We've established that sound does not pass through it, but round it. That wasn't surprising when we knew that it stopped air. But what is odd is the result if you throw a noise at it, so to speak. We set an alarm clock ringing and heaved it into the screen. It, of course, disappeared at once, but the ringing didn't. I went as close to the screen as I dare, and I could still hear it faintly buzzing. A most uncanny sensation first time. And the hand grenades and shells also; there was that faint, far away thudding noise although they had vanished.

"As far as solids are concerned," Judson explained, "we don't know a lot, but we can show you a few specimens." He led the way into his study and picked up a piece of stick from a pile of objects in one corner.

"That," he explained, "was once an old broom. Sheilah pushed the head of it into the screen, goodness knows what happened to that, but here is what was left in her hand."

Martin examined the stick. The end which had touched the screen was a bushy mass of splayed out fibres.

"It was queer," Sheilah told him. "The whole stick sort of shuddered in my hands; I could feel little tremors running up and down it, but it didn't seem to twist or pull in any way."

There were other examples: an iron rod twisted off, a glass rod curiously fractured. Martin inspected them all with interest.

"It's very odd indeed," he said. "You mean to say that you thrust a rod into the screen, that the end of it disappears at once, that the end of it does not protrude on the other side of the screen—and yet it is not severed immediately?"

"Exactly. Sometimes—with the iron bar, for instance—it takes two or three seconds to part. But if you find that odd, look at this."

He handed over a small branch from an oak. A few withered leaves still clung to it. The thick end showed a bunch of wrenched fibres similar to those on the broomstick.

"We found it on the lawn one day when we were clearing up

after an experiment," he added.

Martin looked at it. It was quite unremarkable.

"Well," he said, "it looks as if you had set the machine up too close to a tree, and lopped it off."

"It does," Judson agreed. "But the trouble is, old boy, that we haven't an oak tree here, and there isn't one anywhere near that either of us knows of."

Chapter III A Weapon of Defense

Martin became a not infrequent visitor at the Judsons' during the next eighteen months, but he saw little of Judson himself. Judson, in fact, seemed to see very little of his home. Much of his time was spent traveling, and the intervals mostly in his study. Sheilah was worried about him.

"They're working him to death," she told Martin. "When he's here he works until three or four in the morning and when he's away he's being rushed here and there all the time. He can't stand that kind of thing too long. Besides, the organization and business side isn't really his kind of work."

Martin agreed. The few glimpses he had had of Judson were enough to show that. There were new lines on his face and signs of strain round his eyes; he fidgeted incessantly and was

short tempered with his siter and with everyone else.

"It'll end in a breakdown," she said unhappily. "Lots of people have told him so, but he won't take any notice."

"I know," Martin told her. "I hear from my uncle that he's so edgy that he's becoming impossible to work with. But the trouble is that they'r all in a hurry, and they can't get on without him. He keeps too much in his own hands, and won't let go. Why on earth doesn't he depute more and take it easier?"

"I'm not sure. I think he wants to keep all the control he can because at the bottom of everything he's a bit afraid. You know what the old Field Marshal said to him, well, he still makes fun of that—makes fun of it too often for a man with an easy mind. I may be wrong, Martin, but I've an idea that he thinks he can stop it if it doesn't seem to be working out as he expects."

"But that's ridiculous. He'd never have a chance now."

"You'd think so, but I don't know. He may be keeping some essential part of the machine a secret."

"But would they take it on such terms, do you think?"

"They wouldn't like it, but he makes the terms. Tommy can be remarkably stubborn, you know."

Whether Sheilah was right or not about the cause it was clear

that Judson could not keep on at his present pitch indefinitely. On her behalf Martin tried to reason with him. Judson put it aside.

"You don't understand, old boy. The work's got to be done, and done damn quick. There's no time to lay off."

"But you've been working madly for over a year now. Surely there's someone else who can give you a breather for a bit," Martin protested.

"Not now, not yet. It ought to slack off in a few months, then I'll see. We're working against time, and we've got to beat it. Now, if you don't mind, old boy, there's some work I must get on with. . ."

The scheme developed with remarkably little publicity. Large metal boxes on stands set in concrete began to appear here and there. There was one on the top of the London University tower, one on Bush House, others on Westminster Cathedral, on a chimney of Battersea Power Station, on a tower of the Alexandra Palace, and on one of the remaining towers of the old Crystal Palace. There was said to be one even on the top of the cross of Saint Paul's. It was generally understood that the boxes contained air raid alarms of some kind though there were varied opinions on how they would work.

Other things less obvious than the metal boxes appeared. There were two telephone boxes on the most exposed parts of Hampstead Heath and another at Highgate which had locked doors and permanent "out of order" notices on them. There were several objects which looked like transformers to be found here and there upon high ground both in Surrey and Middlesex. Also on Surrey hilltops there appeared some new summer-house-like huts reputed to be look-out shelters for firewardens. Out Dagenham way were to be found occasional oddly positioned structures bearing an entirely superficial and quite exasperating likeness to public lavatories. Down near Bromley several small water towers arose; only the local authorities knew that they contained no water—and they were at a loss to know what they did contain.

Nor was this outbreak of decidedly minor architecture confined to the London area. Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Glasgow, Edinburgh were a few of the many cities and towns it invaded. Certain seaports learned to their surprise that the landmarks which had served them perfectly well for several generations were inadequate and that it was urgently necessary for them to have new and more solid landmarks; as the Government unexpectedly undertook to defray

the entire cost, they had them. Comment was sparse. True, certain of the unusable telephone boxes came in for scathing remarks in letters to local papers, but nobody can tell merely from its external appearance whether a transformer or a fusebox is unusable or not, and there is a natural reticence on the subject of being taken in by a dummy public lavatory.

If it was suspected that the numbers of heavy cases leaving England for Singapore, Aden, Hong Kong and other strategically important spots did not in fact all contain pianos or agricultural tractors, no one mentioned it. There was activity in the naval dockyards and at the naval bases. New, strange bulges appeared at the foretops of His Majesty's ships of war. There was no disguising them. Foreign agents learned by subtle questions that the British had discovered and were employing a new tap-proof method of wireless communication. Their various governments thereupon started to spend much time and money in the attempt to tap the untappable, not to say non-existent, system, and to disbelieve all normal radio messages.

The summer passed. The Roman Empire continued to rebuild itself in a series of sabre-rattling crises. The Reich made public

references to fertile and foreign lands which were the natural heritage of Wotan's children. The words of democracy heartened by the voice of freedom from across the water, grew a little more dependable. The Balkans took heart and stiffened slightly. There was a faint stirring in the east; a suggestive clink from the hammer and sickle. The sensation that the curtain was about to go up grew more acute.

The Rome-Berlin axis, though still slightly out of true, held together. An inconsiderable island off the Esthonian coast was acquired by the Reich in conditions which resembled a forced sale. The Scandinavians looked on uneasily.

Late in October came a rising in Algeria, trouble in South West Africa, and renewed demands for colonies. Then, while anxious efforts were being made to localize the trouble on the north African coast, an Italian troopship and its escort vanished without trace on its way from Sicily to Tripoli. Threats, accusations and counter accusations flew wildly. In Government buildings in all parts of the world men nodded as they read. "Here it comes," they said, with a half sigh of relief from the tension that was over.

There was no declaration of war; it was not expected that there would be. The value of surprise had grown too high to be thrown

away lightly. It was acknowledged that the one who could first strike a crippling blow was half way to winning. For three or four days vituperation erupted from the presses; then came action.

At ten o'clock on the night of November the fifth trusted members of the Nazi Party engaged themselves in long, and sometimes not very important, foreign telephone calls. It came about that all lines from Germany were in use. The scheme was admirably calculated to stop any news getting out of the country, save in one particular—that the first batch of Germans so anxious to greet their friends abroad all wished to do so at exactly ten o'clock G.M.T., not a minute before and not a minute after. This curious occurrence taken in conjunction with the knowledge that the Belgian wires were also humming with business deals or friendly greetings in German, and that there was unusual pressure on the Italian service also, was warning enough.

The general public knew nothing. There was no dimming of lights, no alarming notice from the radio; superficially all remained normal.

In an office in Whitehall a group of experts hurriedly summoned together sat in front of a large scale map of southwest England which covered the whole of one wall. There was little talk-

ing. Judson, fidgeting and lighting one cigarette from another continuously, look ill to the point of collapse. There was sweat on his forehead, and the cigarette trembled in his fingers as he raised it. The old Field Marshal muttered to his aide to get the fellow a drink quickly.

On the tables were maps of smaller scale. Below the wall map an officer sat at a keyboard which suggested a calculating machine. At the back of the room were two operators with private exchanges. They called out telephone messages as they received them.

"British merchant vessel *Ellen Kate*, ten miles off Ostende reports large fleet of planes without lights passed over her in westerly direction, 11:32 p.m."

"Mail plane, Amsterdam to Croydon, reports large number of planes without lights at great height heading west. Latitude, 51.56 north. Longitude, 2.55 east. 11:36 p.m."

"H.M. Destroyer *Nous* reports considerable number of planes, estimate impossible, proceeding west; 12 to 14 thousand feet, without lights. Latitude, 51.50 north. Longitude, 2.30 east. 11:40 p.m."

An orderly entered the room silently and handed a sheet of paper to the Field Marshall. He read it, and passed it on to the Marshal of the Air. The message ran:

"H.M.S. *Unappeasable* reports large fleet of planes left Sicily. Passed south over Licata 11:30 p.m." The Marshal of the Air looked up, his lips silently forming the word "Malta." The Field Marshal nodded. Both turned their attention back to the maps and the telephonists. Messages were still coming in:

"Swedish liner, *Varmland*, Gothenburg to New York, reports fleet of unlighted planes to the south of her, apparently headed west. Latitude, 51.60 north. Longitude, 2 degrees east. 11:45 p.m."

"U.S.S.R. merchant vessel *Turkish*, London to Leningrad, reports large number of planes passing north of her, heading west. Latitude, 51.71 north. Longitude, 1.90 east. 11:48 p.m."

An officer looked up swiftly.

"They've split, sir,"

"Warn Harwich."

"Harwich on the line, sir. They've heard. They're passing on warning to Leicester, Birmingham and Manchester. Hull on the line, sir. They're warning Leeds and Sheffield. North Foreland calling, sir. The detectors there have picked them up. They're passing north of the coast, following the estuary. They estimate five or six hundred planes."

A pause followed, then:

"Shoeburyness calling. They think the fleet's divided again. Chatham calling. They say they

will proceed independently according to plan."

"Stand by," ordered the Field Marshal abruptly. The man beside the map stiffened and poised his hands over the keyboard.

"Horizontal screens, sections D and E," directed the old man.

The operator pressed two keys. The districts east of London, both north and south of the river glowed faintly on the wall map.

"Tilbury reports that they are overhead," intoned the telephonist.

"Alignment Seven," snapped the Field Marshal.

The operator's hands rattled over the keys. A string of lights broke out on the map. They ran in a curve from Brentwood, through Romford, Ilford, Woolwich, and Sidcup to Eynsford. A row of bright points which meant that the Judson Annihilator had come into action in earnest for the first time.

There was dead silence in the room for perhaps three minutes, then:

"Add Alignment Twelve," said the steady voice.

Again a string of lights starting at Brentwood sprang out on the map but this time it ran by way of East Horndon, Orsett, Tilbury, Rochester, Kingsdown.

In that irregular glowing circle there was contained to the best belief of everyone in the room every attacking plane of

the southern division save the few handled by Chatham.

Someone opened a window. Above the regular murmur of the traffic there was another sound; the far away drone of hundreds of engines. Most of the men in the room crowded closer to the window and held their breath to listen the better.

"It's getting less," said someone. "By God, it's getting less."

Judson got up unsteadily. He looked round the room with a rather foolish smile.

"Well, it's the end for some of you chaps," he said, quickly. "Better start looking for new jobs tomorrow." He began to laugh and sway on his feet.

His neighbor caught him as he fell.

"The fellow's tight," he said. "I'm not surprised. I'd be tight myself if I'd done half what he's done."

November the sixth dawned in London a clear, sunny day. Suburban trains decanted their regular thousands, offices and shops opened, trade went on as usual. Yet for all the appearance of normality there was a tenuous, indefinable sense of something in the wind. Fleet Street, which was buzzing with rumors, found little substantial enough to print. The later editions carried an official government regret for any disturbance its surprise aerial

maneuvers might have caused to residents in east London and in certain other parts of the country. Contenting itself with that, Whitehall sat back and awaited developments, happily picturing the consternation in Berlin and Rome.

And consternation there was. Even a totalitarian state cannot hope to hush up indefinitely the complete disappearance of a large part of its air force and most of its best flyers. Agents estimated that in all, bombers and fighters to the number of a thousand or twelve hundred had set out upon the greatest raid in history. They had kept touch by radio until the English coast was reached—after that there had been silence. The cones of the home plane detectors remained turned skyward to catch the first sound of the return. Radio operators waited throughout the night for news, and in the dawn they were still waiting.

Official accounts written beforehand were set up in type and held ready; press time came and the accounts remained unused. London and all the other cities of England were untouched; even from the lips of their Embassy and consular staffs Berlin could scarcely believe it. Weary ground-staffs still waited ready on the flying fields. The underground hangers remained forlorn. Radiomen still called desperately into the unresponsive ether.

Rumors of disaster started to creep out from the flying fields and the newspaper offices. Those who had heard the fleet set out began to talk. The fiasco could not be kept quiet; the friends and relatives of the missing men could not all be quieted; there were too many of them. Gradually the tale got around of a new Armada which had never returned.

Similarly in Italy. A fleet estimated at about seven hundred planes had set out to blow Malta to bits. Malta still lay unperturbed in the kindly sunshine—but the planes; *il Duce's* pride which were to 'darken the sky with their wings'; where were they?

No one seemed to know; no one *did* know.

A near panic spread through the army councils of the world.

England professed an inability to understand the situation. She had a number of planes up practicing on the night of the 5th; all had landed safely. But she understood that several German and Italian planes, also practicing, had disappeared. She offered help in the search, if informed of the localities of the disappearances.

Totalitarian speeches reached masterly heights of face-saving, but the planes were gone and the pick of the flyers with them. A new force must be trained, but—and here lay the real root

of apprehension—for what? To vanish from the face of the earth like the rest?

Chapter IV Strange Occurrences

It was four months later that Martin met the Judsons on their return from Cornwall. Letters from Sheilah had told him that her brother was making a good recovery from the strain of overwork, and they had not exaggerated. Judson was looking better than he had at any time since the demonstration of the machine to Major-General Stalham. Martin's interest, however, was chiefly in Sheilah. In that time he had seen her only on two of her brief visits to London; hurried, unsatisfactory meetings which had had to be worked in between appointments—no fit occasions to find out whether she had made up her mind yet.

Things had been in that stage a long time now. She liked him, oh, yes, she liked him; she was fond of him. But marriage, well, that was different. Oh, yes, she'd sooner marry him than anyone else she knew; but she wasn't sure that she wanted to marry at all—not at present. She didn't know; she couldn't make up her mind. A most uncomfortable and not very flattering state of affairs, Martin felt. A different type of man would, he knew, have forced

the issue long ago; but he avoided that, aware that though failure would make him miserable, success would leave him uneasy. He preferred a voluntary answer, whichever it might be, to one sprung by shock tactics.

Judson was talkative, rambling from one subject to another. He inquired after Martin's uncle.

"How is the old boy? Haven't seen any of them, as a matter of fact. No loss to either side. I don't like them, and they despise me.

"Despise you?" Martin echoed, surprisedly.

"Well, it's partly that and partly disapproval. For one thing it has now dawned on them that the annihilator has upset the entire military apple-cart, and for another they feel that there's something ungentlemanly about it as a weapon. They've put up with me because they had to, but they don't want to have more to do with me than they must. To your professional soldier war is a game, a kind of super chess—civilians like you and me who look upon it as a mess to be cleared up as soon as possible are gate-crashers and boors."

Martin understood, and agreed:

"I know. We've a number in the family. But what about you, Juddy? What are you going to do now it's over?"

"Me. Oh, now I can get on with useful and sensible applications of the annihilator. There

are all sorts of things one might do with it. It will be useful for rubbish disposal, for instance—just tip the stuff onto a screen, and it vanishes. No more dumps, no more hideous slag heaps. It may be possible to use it for smoke disposal so that we shall have decent, clean cities. I don't know, there are plenty of possibilities, but the first thing to do is learn more about it; make it reasonably safe to handle; work out positive controls; find an insulator if possible, and all that kind of thing. We're going to get down to that as soon as we can get the stuff together."

"We," Martin noticed. That meant that Sheilah would be helping.

It did. Sheilah admitted it unhappily. A long conversation with her settled nothing new; it criss-crossed back and forth over the same old ground, and got nowhere. She ended miserably: "It's no good, Martin. I've got to be sure, and I'm not absolutely sure. And that makes it unfair for you. Martin, why don't you find someone else? You deserve someone else, Martin—a nice sensible girl who can make up her own mind, and make you happy."

"There isn't anyone else," Martin said.

Judson took a roomy house in Surrey. It stood in forty acres of wall encircled grounds a few miles from Dorking, on the lower

slopes of the hills overlooking the country to the south. Workmen were busy on it for some weeks and when he and his sister moved into it at the end of April it had become part dwelling house and part experimental workshops and laboratories. An electric alarm fence had been run around inside the boundary wall. Two assistants lived in the house, and two burly individuals who seemed to have no well defined duties occupied the erstwhile coachman's quarters. The expoliceman who dwelt with his wife in the gatehouse gave all visitors severe scrutiny, and unless their names were on his list telephoned to the house before admitting them. Martin on his first visit had the sensation that he lived in a state of invisible siege.

"It's all rather irritating and melodramatic," Sheilah confessed, "but we hadn't any choice in the matter. It was a case of putting up with what the War Office calls 'adequate protection of official secrets' or doing no work on it at all."

Judson had overcome some technical difficulties and produced an annihilator throwing a quarter circle of ten feet radius. It had led to some interesting discoveries. One was that for annihilation it was necessary for the object to pass through the screen either by its

own motion or by movement of the screen itself.

They took the ten foot projector into the garden which was still untidy from the neglect of years. In front of a dreary looking laurel bush Judson set the machine low on the ground. He tilted the projector's slot upward, switched on and brought the invisible screen down to horizontal. The bush vanished from the top downward until only a ragged stump remained.

"As I tilted it the bush passed through the plane of the screen," he said. "But—he searched around and found a half dead tree. "Watch this," he added.

The machine was set up again, this time the slot was horizontal, pointed directly at the trunk.

He switched on, tapped the machine lightly, and switched off again. The tree, with a tired, slow motion, leaned over and fell in a crackle of its rotten branches. Martin stared at the stump.

"If you were to measure it you would find that a slice approximately half an inch thick has been taken out of the trunk," Judson told him. "The work's not quite as neat as a saw, but it ought to revolutionize the lumber industry."

"Or quarry work," Martin suggested. "Or canal digging and drainage work."

Judson hesitated at that. He frowned.

"You'd think so," he agreed, "but that's one of the things I'm up against. There's something funny about that, something fundamental about it I can't make out yet."

"You mean you can't make the solid earth disappear," Martin smiled. "Well, there's something consoling about that. But if a brick—why not earth?"

"Exactly. Why not? But I'll show you."

A few moments later he and Martin bent over a patch which had been swept by the annihilator's rays. In theory there should have been a short ditch ten feet deep. There was not even a depression. Martin prodded his fingers into the soil.

"It's real enough," he said, amazedly.

A few minutes ago the space in front of them had been a patch of barren earth with a covering of last year's beech leaves. Now, along the line where the screen had passed, and nowhere else, was a covering of coarse grass.

"If it had been the other way around—" he said, feebly.

"Quite," Judson agreed. "But it isn't."

Later Martin mentioned the phenomenon to Sheilah. She nodded with out surprise.

"I know, there've been several things like that. Did you hear about my birds?"

Martin shook his head.

"That happened about ten days ago. I was working in the lab with the small machine when I suddenly found two swallows flying wildly around the room. They couldn't have flown in just then because it happened that all the windows were closed. And it doesn't seem likely that they'd have been there all the time without my knowing because I'd been working for an hour and a half before they began fluttering about. They just came from nowhere.

"But that wasn't nasty, like the thing that happened some months ago near London. They were trying out one of the defense machines when something plopped down close to the projector. When they went up to it they found that it was a man's hand hacked off at the wrist. It was still warm when they picked it up, but it belonged to nobody who was there.

"There's some explanation, of course," she added, "some angle to the thing which neither Tommy nor I nor anyone else has any idea of yet. But we don't seem to be getting much nearer the answer."

Martin left later with plenty to think about and a feeling that there was an element of danger which

none of their elaborate precautions covered. He had a sensation that Judson and Sheilah were not unlike people walking too close to the edge of a cliff in a thick fog. It was no light uneasiness, it would not be dismissed, and remained as a background to all his conscious thoughts. Next Sunday, he determined, he would have it out with Sheilah and try once more to get her away from it all. But that left time for a lot to happen.

On Friday evening as Martin entered his club, intending to dine, the porter handed him a telephone message:

Mr. Judson urgently wishes you to ring him as soon as possible.

Five minutes later he heard Judson's voice.

"Thank the Lord," it said. "I've been trying to get you all day. Martin, it's about Sheilah. She's disappeared."

Martin put out a hand to steady himself. He felt as if he had had a physical blow. At the back of his mind a voice was gabbling—"It's happened. This is what you were afraid of. That damned machine has killed her! He took a grip of himself. His voice was curiously flat as he said. "I'll be there in an hour or so."

It was a few minutes under the hour when he stopped his car with a spatter of gravel in front of the

house. Judson himself opened the door and led him straight to the lounge.

"What's happened?" Martin asked.

Judson poured some whisky into a tumbler and handed it over.

"Drink this. I'll tell you. It happened about twelve o'clock this morning. I was upstairs working out some results. Sheilah was on the front lawn. She'd got a one hundred and eighty degree projector there and was trying out some smoke experiments. All at once I heard her scream. I thought she'd hurt herself somehow, and rushed to the window.

"She was down there on the lawn, and there was a man there too—a big fellow with a beard and ragged clothes. He'd got hold of Sheilah by the wrist, and she was fighting like a demon. She screamed again; I shouted and the man looked up. I just caught a glimpse of his face as I turned to bolt downstairs for all I was worth.

"It can't have taken more than a few seconds, but when I came out both Sheilah and the man had gone. Just as I arrived the two guards came pelting around the corner of the house. They were at the back somewhere when she screamed, and they'd seen nobody as they ran to the front. One of the assistants turned up a moment later. He'd seen the struggle

from the workshop window, but like me he'd missed the end of it.

"The alarm fence hadn't been touched, so it was clear that they hadn't got out of the grounds yet. We split into couples and searched the place. We didn't find a trace of Sheilah or of the man. The lodge-keeper swore that the gate had not been open since half-past eleven. We know the alarm fence was in perfect order because we tested it. One of the guards suggested that the man might have climbed a tree and swung over the fence that way—it's not likely because there are plenty of alarm wires about connected with the fence, besides that didn't explain Sheilah's disappearance.

"We put the local police on to it at once. They've pulled in one or two tramps, but not the man we wanted. And so far they've found no trace of Sheilah.

"Whitehall's been on the phone cursing and swearing. They've got men watching the boats and the airports. I tell you, Martin, it's a hell of a business. There's no saying what they might do to her."

"They?" Martin said.

"Yes, the people who've got hold of her. Don't you see what it means? They'll think she can give them the secret of the annihilator, and there's nothing they'll stop at to get it."

"But can she?"

"No. I wish to heaven she could. She's worked with it a lot, as you know, but I've never told her the basis of the construction—I thought it would be safer for her not to know. My God, what a fool thing to do! If she could tell them, that'd be that. But if they think she's just holding out on them . . . There's dam little chivalry in the espionage business. Oh, Lord, what the hell can we do about it?"

Martin sat silent. His reasoning power was swamped for the present. Instead of thinking he was looking at a series of fearsome mental images which he tried and failed to suppress.

When, some hours later, they went upstairs, the idea of sleep was impossible; even to rest in a chair, intolerable. For more than two hours he paced back and forth across the room smoking furiously. At length he found himself methodically laying out each aspect of the affair, considering it and weighing the probabilities.

There was only one way out of the grounds which would leave no trace—Judson's screen. What way into the grounds would leave no trace? Was that also Judson's screen?

There had been the birds, the severed hand, and still longer ago, the inexplicable oak branch . . .

Surely the answer was that the annihilator did not annihilate.

But what then did it do?

With that question still in his mind Martin dropped on the bed and surprisingly fell asleep.

The birds woke him. It was still early, soon after six. He crossed the room and looked out on the new late Spring day. The shadows still slanted, and the lines thrown by the tree trunks barred the lawn below him. In the middle of the open space he noticed the projector Sheilah had been using yesterday. It had been switched off, of course, but no one had remembered to put it away. He stood motionless for five full minutes, staring at it; then with his mind made up he turned and left the room cautiously.

The machine was in order. He had been half afraid lest the lead to the mains might have been disconnected, but the red warning light flashed on as he pressed the switch. To make certain he scrambled his handkerchief into a ball and threw it into the invisible screen. It vanished.

Martin stepped back a few steps and braced himself. Somewhere behind him a window opened. Judson's voice called in alarm:

"No. Martin. Stop it, you damned fool!"

Martin clenches his fists, put his head down, and ran full tilt at the annihilator's screen!

Chapter V An Amazing New World

Something tripped him. He fell forward with a queer twisting wrenching sensation, and met the ground with a thud which winded him. He struggled, gasping, to a sitting position. Not until then did he realize that he was no longer on the lawn.

The first thing to catch his eyes was the handkerchief he had thrown through the screen. It lay beside him on a tuft of wiry grass. He stared at it a moment and then lifted his gaze.

He sat in an open space, a kind of gap in a hillside wood. Trees closed in his view on three sides, but in front the ground was clearer, encumbered only by shrubs and sprawling brakes of bramble. The slight downward slope enabled him to see over them into the distance beyond. The valley in the foreground was a sea of tree tops; featureless save where some slight rise suggested a frozen green wave. Behind it, bounding the scene, rose a ridge of smoothly rounded hills. He gazed instantly at them, following the contours: there was no doubt about it, however unfamiliar the immediate surroundings, they remained the same line of Downs which one could see from Judson's lawn.

He turned around to look again at the trees near him. The grew haphazard, unthinned and with little room to develop. Unrestrained ivy climbed to throttle

them, and many of the trunks it had killed leaned on their still living neighbors for support. Among the holes was a choked undergrowth whence protruded occasional broken limbs of trunks slowly rotting in the tangle below.

Behind him the edge of the wood was only a few yards away. Nothing appeared to intervene between him and it. Thoughtful, he reached for his handkerchief; he crumpled it up and threw it toward the undergrowth. Five feet from his hand it whisked out of existence. A moment later it reappeared, materializing from nowhere to flutter down beside him. He got to his feet. As he straightened, another white object flew close past his head. He retrieved it; a piece of paper wrapped around a stone. On it was a hurried scribble in Judson's hand:

"What's happened? Where are you?"

Martin found a pencil in his pocket. He turned the paper over and considered his answer. He looked again at the line of the Downs. They told unmistakably where he was, but—He shook his head, and wrote simply:

"Am all right. Will try to find Sheilah. Screen invisible from this side. On no account move it. Keep it going till we come back."

He rewrapped the stone and threw it back. Leaving his hand-

kerchief to mark the spot, he went to the trees and returned with an armful of rotten branches. He broke them carefully in a double row leading to the invisible screen. The thought that one had only to run up the path they marked to be projected back into the familiar everyday world gave considerable comfort.

So far he had acted in a dream-like, half automatic way, forcing himself to believe in the reality of the surroundings.

A little distance away a laurel bush lay on its side. The leaves were turning brown, and the stem was badly mangled. He recalled Judson's demonstration the previous week-end. Not far away from it lay a curious wooden disc. He remembered Judson saying that a half inch slice from the trunk of the dead tree had been removed—well, here it was. But where was it—and where was he?

He stood still, listening. There was no sound but the rustle of the leaves in the light breeze, the song of small birds close at hand, and far away the call of a cuckoo. It was disturbing. In every place he had known save on the tops of high mountains there had been at least distant reminders of human presence; the sound of a car, the distant rattle of a train, the whistle of an engine, something to give assurance that one was not alone. Here, there was a sense of desolation. He began

a search of the open space. The result was disappointing until he drew toward the western edge but there he came upon the faint suggestion of a track winding close to the fringe of the woods. It was not well trodden and showed little sign of recent use, but that it had been made by human feet was indisputable.

He looked carefully around once more to fix the aspect of the place in his memory before he left.

Soon he was in the wood traveling circuitously though with little difficulty southward.

At the bottom of the hill he crossed a stream by means of a fallen tree, and picked up the track again on the further bank with some difficulty. He consciously realized for the first time that whatever else might have changed, the season of the year remained about the same. It was an unwelcome thought for he was growing uncomfortably conscious of his hunger. He began to regret that he had not thought of asking Judson to throw food through the screen.

A short stretch of unexpected uphill led on to a sandy ridge where the deciduous trees gave way to pines. Among them was a pile of rubbish, grass and weed grown, but showing the ends of squared stones in places. He climbed to the top of it to get his bearings. To the north the wooded

hillside was broken in several places by patches of grass, but he was unable to identify for certain the one on which he had found himself. In the other directions stretched a plain of swaying tree tops without a landmark; not a spire, nor a chimney, nor a power pylon showed above them. Far away to the east there was a smudge of smoke, save for that nothing but the hills, the sky, and the trees—unending trees.

He descended to the path again and followed it doggedly. At the foot of the ridge a better used path joined it from the right, and the two bore eastward as one giving him hope that it must lead to a habitation of some kind before long. Down on the level the ground was moister and the increased lushness of the bushes shut him in, limiting his visibility to two or three yards in each direction. The discovery of the first clearing, therefore, took him completely by surprise. One moment he was imprisoned in the trees; the next he stood looking over an open space of five or six acres.

He stopped in astonishment for the rectangular patch had not only been cleared, but tilled and planted. Rows of pale shoots which as a townsman he could not identify were already thrusting upward. He looked to right and left, half expecting to see bent figures at work, but there was no one in sight. Nevertheless, it was with

rising hope that he went on, following the line which the path took straight across the field.

Halfway to the other side he stopped, staring down at the impression of a woman's heel . . .

It's owner, he noticed as he went on, was not the last who had used the path. In many places the marks had been wholly or partly obliterated by shapeless impressions such as a soft slipper might make. Once, a little to the side of the main beat he found the print of a man's boot with a plain sole and nailed heel. It made him curious, for he could find no repetition of it, and was irritably aware that to a man of experience the signs might read as plainly as a direction book.

His eyes were on the print and he was unaware that there was any other living person near until a voice spoke suddenly close behind him.

He started violently and spun around. Ten feet away stood a young man in a soiled and much worn grey uniform who held in a steady, capable hand a large automatic pistol. Martin raised his hands instinctively though he had not understood the other's words. The man spoke again. Martin shook his head:

"Can you speak English?" he asked.

"Enough," said the other. "You will stand still," he added.

He stepped closer. The muzzle

of the pistol pressed against Martin's solar plexus as its owner patted pockets and armpits experimentally. Satisfied that Martin was unarmed, he withdrew a pace.

"How are you here?" he demanded.

Martin thought quickly.

"I don't know. Something funny has happened. I was walking in a garden—then I suddenly found myself in the woods up there. I don't understand it. But," he added more aggressively, "I don't see that that gives you any right to threaten me with a pistol. What's going on? Who are you?"

He was doubtful whether the other understood much of what he had said, but it seemed the right line to take. The man was impassive, he showed neither belief or disbelief. After a few moments' consideration:

"You come with me," he decided, and waved his pistol to indicate that Martin should turn around. "You keep to the path. Not to run."

"But, look here—" Martin began, more for the form of the thing than for any other purpose.

"You come," said the man with the pistol, briefly.

Chapter VI Incredible Discoveries

The language difficulty was a barrier. In the two miles or so of woods and occasional oases of cultivation which followed the man spoke only to give directions where the path branched once or twice. Martin marched obediently, acutely conscious of the pistol behind him, pondering what its presence and that of its owner implied.

They arrived at their destination almost without warning. The trees ended abruptly as usual. A few scrawny looking cows of no recognizable breed and some sheep of equally miscellaneous descent grazed on a meadow of rough grass. A small stream which crossed the place north to south was bridged by a few trunks crudely squared and set together. Close to the further bank clustered a village of wattle walled, thatched huts.

They crossed the bridge, passed between two of the insecure looking buildings, and came out on an open space. The inescapable first impression of the place was its smell. Each of the encircling hut dwellers appeared to dispose of his refuse by flinging it just outside the door so that the whole place was fringed with heaps of reeking, rotting matter. Opposite some of the doors and in front of the main exits and entrances the filth had been shovelled aside to leave a free path, and as these gauntlets were used

swarms of gorging flies rose on either hand.

The few men and women who were to be seen were vastly outnumbered by the children who played in the dust or crawled adventurously over the heaps of filty. The smallest of these were naked, but the older ones and every adult in sight wore garments of coarsely woven, undyed and, it would appear, unwashed wool. On their feet were cross laced pieces of soft leather. The men were bearded more or less unkemptly, the lank hair of the women was mostly worn long and in plaits. None took more than passing notice of Martin and his captor. Martin, in spite of the pistol, stopped, and then looked at the other in amazement. The man wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

"Swine. We teach them," he said, disgustedly.

They turned to the left. Further up the bank of the stream and well clear of the village they drew near a log built house which if not luxurious, was a great improvement on anything the village had shown. At the rear, a clumsy, undershot water wheel turned slowly. On a small, roofed veranda in front, two men in uniforms similar to his captor's were sitting in comfortable, crude chairs. The only other article of furniture present was a machine gun mounted on a block of wood.

The man with Martin shifted his pistol to his left hand and raised his right. "Heil Hitler!" he said.

The other two, one verging on middle age, and the other little more than a boy, rose and responded though their attention was on Martin. The new arrival reported rapidly in German, then all four entered the house.

The main room was lit dimly by two windows. There was no glass in them and they could be closed only by shutters of clay-filled basket work. Three or four chairs and a table ingeniously constructed from roughly trimmed wood were set on the naked earth floor. The rear wall was in shadow but he could make out a large wooden pulley which turned continuously, and the slow movement of the water-wheel beyond made a background of incessant creaks and groans.

The senior man pulled a chair up to the table. He produced a notebook, opened it carefully, and fixed Martin with a direct gaze.

"Your name, occupation, nationality and place of birth?" he said in fluent, but throaty English.

"Just wait a minute," Martin objected. "I want to know what's happened first. Everything's crazy. A few hours ago I was walking in an ordinary English garden. Now the whole world's gone topsy-turvy. Miles of forest, no peo-

ple, no houses—except an incredible stinking hut village—and you. I want to know what's happened. Am I mad? You must explain."

The man at the table shook his head.

"I am not here to explain. You are an enemy subject, and our prisoner. Your name?"

"Enemy subject! What do you mean? There's no war."

He was aware that they were all looking at him intently, seeming not to believe him. He went on:

"I tell you. I was in London yesterday. There's no war in Europe—and no immediate sign of it. There's trouble in the East, and the Red Army is advancing in Brazil, but there isn't war in Europe. It's ridiculous to say that I am an enemy subject."

"You were in London yesterday?" his questioner asked, slowly.

"Certainly I was." Martin put his hand in his pocket and pulled out some letters. "Here you are, look at them, look at the postmarks and see the date."

The man took the letters. All three bent over them and exchanged remarks. The leader looked up again.

"These may be genuine, but they do not prove that there is no war. Letters are delivered even in wartime."

"But I tell you—"

"War began on the 5th of November," the other interrupted, dogmatically. "If, as you say, there is no war, when was peace made?"

"But war didn't begin then. It—"

"On the 5th of November Germany sent out an aerial fleet to bomb London. If you are trying to tell me that England and France failed to reply with military action, then I do not believe you."

"But London was not attacked," Martin protested. He affected to think back. "I remember that there was some international excitement somewhere about then. It was said that Germany had lost a great number of planes on maneuvers, and Italy too, as it happened, but the papers were never quite clear as to how many or what actually happened to them. However, it is quite certain that there was no war."

The three Germans looked at one another. They were a trifle less confident. The leader turned back to Martin.

"Do you know how many planes were lost in these 'maneuvers'?" he asked.

"No," Martin admitted, "though according to the rumors it was a considerable number. The whole thing seemed to be kept as quiet as possible."

"I see," said the other, thoughtfully.

After a moment or two of frowning contemplation he rose and crossed to the back wall, near the turning pulley. He did something there and began to talk rapidly in German. It took Martin some seconds to realize that the dark corner held a small wireless transmitter. After a short conversation he returned.

"I have orders that you are to be sent to headquarters for examination. As it is late today for starting, you will leave tomorrow at dawn."

It was an unpleasant suggestion. Martin had no wish to go to headquarters, wherever that might be. His object was to stay in the neighborhood and search for Sheilah. But the subject of the girl was not easily broached. If he were to let it be known that he was searching for her his captors would immediately and rightly assume that his presence was not accidental. Once let that become apparent and they would do their best to find out how much he did know. The situation was out of hand at present, and he could see no satisfactory means of dealing with it. He shrugged his shoulders with a fatalistic acceptance.

"Then may I have some food?" he asked. "I've eaten nothing today."

The meal produced for him was of salted meat, served in a wooden dish, a bowl of chopped

root vegetables, a few slabs of hard, dark bread, a little butter and some cheese. A woman evidently from the hut village, made it ready for him. He watched her curiously as she came and went between the table and an adjoining room.

Like the others he had seen she was not attractive to the eye. Her single clumsy garment of undyed wool bore marks of long wear, and the only attempts to relieve its pure utilitarianism were crudely stencilled or blocked designs in a dark brown pigment at hem and neck. Her only ornament was a necklace woven of copper wire. The skin of her arms, legs and face was brown from exposure, and her hair ill cared for. But despite the superficial neglect there was no slovenliness in her movements. They were quick and deft. With surprise he realized that she was much younger than he had thought at first. The shapeless dress had misled him, but as she stood where the light touched her face he could see that she was little more than a girl. He saw, too, a pair of alert, intelligent brown eyes with an expression, as they met his own, which was partly curiosity, and partly something he was at a loss to determine.

The leader of the Germans and the one who had brought him had gone out together, leaving

the third and youngest member of their party on guard. He looked about twenty-four or twenty-five, and a not ill-disposed young man. He was healthy and well developed without being burly, with a look of straight-forward honesty in his blue eyes. Though the fair hair was a trifle ragged in its trimming, the shave not perfect and the uniform over well-worn, his manners suggested that the defects were due to necessity rather than carelessness. He politely informed Martin for the lack of table implements one had to make shift with a pocket knife, and inquired whether he minded smoke during the meal. Upon Martin's reassurance he deftly rolled some brown shavings into a leaf and lit them. An odor of autumn bonfires drifted through the room. Martin hastily offered a cigarette from his own case; it was accepted with gratitude.

Neither spoke again until the meal was finished. Martin, feeling the better for it, lit a cigarette for himself and set his elbows on the table. He looked thoughtfully at the other. The young German sat comfortably in one of the crude chairs. A large pistol holster at his belt was well in evidence, but his expression was not unfriendly, and there was a slight twinkle in the blue eyes as they met his own.

"Well, you're a cool customer," he said, and only a faint trace of

accent told that it was not an Englishman speaking.

"Bluff," Martin assured him. "In reality I'm an extremely bewildered customer, but there's nothing to be gained by my registering bewilderment. However, I'd be very grateful if you would explain just what's going on. For quite a long time I thought it was a nightmare, but I don't seem to be able to wake up."

"It is a nightmare," said the other. "We've lived in it for six months."

"This place," Martin said, waving an arm to include both immediate surroundings and far horizons, "where is it? It is unfamiliar, and yet it is not; I could swear that I know that line of hills to the south."

"Probably you do. They are the Forest Ridges, and beyond them, a little to the west, the South Downs."

Martin shook his head.

"That only makes the nightmare more nightmarish. We can't both be having the same hallucination. What's happened? What sort of unknown England is this? How can a countryside change in a flash from a well populated farming and residential area to a land of forests and squalid settlements?"

"I don't know," the German admitted. "There are several theories, but—well, most of us just try to accept what's hap-

pened and make the best of it."

"But that's what I want to know: what *has* happened?"

The other hesitated a moment, then:

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you as much as we know. After all, you're in the same mess—you'll have to live with us and like us . . . Can you spare me another cigarette, or are you treasuring them? You won't be able to get any more, you know."

"Go ahead!" Martin told him, offering his open case.

"Our squadron," the German pilot began, "joined the main fleet soon after ten o'clock on the evening of November the 5th. Everything had been planned with precision. Just after ten we caught the first faint distant humming of the fleet. They were traveling fast. The noise grew quickly from a murmur to a throbbing, drumming sound which beat down upon us in waves. The whole world seemed to tremble with the noise of engines; never before had the sky been so full of sound. To hear it grow was exciting. One felt a surge of pride, a sense of overwhelming power at being part of such an irresistible force.

"As we flew on, other squadrons joined us. Sometimes they came in to the flanks; at others, when we passed directly over

their aerodromes, we could see them slide along the ground as they took off to climb after us.

"There was little radio communication, but as we approached the frontier, Franz, my observer, called to me that orders were for the whole fleet to extinguish navigation lights. The moon was up, giving a clear light. Our line stretched out many miles behind: so great a number that as one looked across them there was a sense that we were stationary while the world revolved below.

"Before long we caught sight of the sea. It shone as brightly as the moon it was reflecting. Occasionally we thought we could make out ships like tiny dark specks on the spangled surface.

"Three quarters of the way across the order came to divide. The right wing altered course, and half the fleet fell away, bound for the industrial cities of the Midlands and North. The rest of us held on for the Thames estuary which would guide us up to London.

"The coast when it came into sight amazed us. We had expected that at least a late warning of our coming would reach England before we could hope to arrive. But it appeared that the English are indeed sometimes as casual as they would like others to believe. The coast towns were fully lighted; the lighthouses and lightships pulsing as usual.

"We were dead on our course, and as we made the estuary we could see the glow of London painting the whole sky a dingy red in front of us. Before long we could see the massed millions of lights and signs which caused it. There was criminal negligence somewhere in the English service. Clearly no news had come through about us for not a district had dimmed. More amazing still, not a single British plane had climbed to intercept us.

"Franz called to me in a worried voice. He did not like it. Failing any other information, he said, the sound detectors on the coast must have picked us up long ago, but not one gun had opened fire. He had a superstitious feeling that it was too easy.

"Six bombers with their fighters were detached to attack Chat-ham. We went on. London lay open to us. The bombers would be at work now long before enemy planes could reach anything like our height. I did not feel as Franz did. The glittering, careless arrogance of the city just ahead angered me so that I regretted that I was not handling bombs.

"We began to extend for action, and it was then that the incredible thing happened.

"My machine seemed to wrench and twist in a quite unfamiliar way. For a moment I thought that a wing had collapsed. It had

not, but something had gone very wrong with the engine. It slowed suddenly, with a horrible grinding noise; the plane shuddered all through with the jarring, then the whole thing seized solid. Simultaneously there was a shout from Franze in my earphones.

"'It's gone,' he cried. '*Herr gott!* it's all gone.'

"I looked down. He was right. Every one of the millions of lights had vanished. All was black save for the gleam of the moonlight on the curling river. It was uncanny, a blackout beyond belief. Not a glare from a railway engine, not a flash from trams or electric trains, no lights of moving cars or of craft on the river, no glow from factory chimneys.

"'No bridges,' shouted Franz.

"He was right about that, too. There was not a single bridge over the pale Thames. Even the river itself looked different from the map I had memorized that afternoon. The turns were not the same, and there seemed to be lakes alongside it where no lakes should be.

"I glanced hurriedly around. A large number of planes seemingly in the same helpless state as ourselves was dropping down. I saw three falling in flames. Another, with a collapsed wing, fell past us and disappeared, twisting beneath. Some had already hit the ground, their cargoes of

bombs exploding with tremendous concussions. But still up above us was a mighty throbbing of engines telling that not all the fleet had been overtaken by the same fate.

"I turned my attention to making the best landing I could.

"We were lucky, Franz and I. I made a pancake. The soft ground tore off our undercarriage. The plane stood on her nose for a second, and then fell back. We had a nasty shaking, and I took a bump on my head. The next thing I remember was Franz offering me a flask.

"'Pretty good work,' he was saying.

"After a drink we lit cigarettes. We could still hear the sound of motors up above, but it was faint now, and as we listened it gradually died away. I felt forlorn as silence closed in on us, and so, I think, did Franz. And what a silence! It was as if the whole world were dead.

"Here and there was a glow of burning wreckage. Out on our right came a sudden new burst of flame. As we sat we could see the fire run across the fabric of a plane and take hold; for some seconds the frame glowed in ghostly outline before it collapsed.

"Franz and I looked at one another. We knew what that meant. Orders were to destroy one's machine if forced down in enemy country. Nevertheless, we hesi-

tated. We felt that there was something here that our orders had not reckoned with: we both felt it. A sense that the catastrophe was in some way uncanny. I looked questioningly at Franz; he shook his head.

"'Let's get ready, but wait until they come,' he suggested. 'We can fire it at the last moment.'

"Franz looked to the radio in the hope that it might still be unbroken. As far as one could tell from inspection it seemed to have survived, but the aerials had been carried away, and it took him some time to rig up a makeshift. When he had done it and connected up his earphones he looked at me with a grin of satisfaction.

"'They're calling,' he said. 'We are not to destroy our plane, but are to report, and await further signals.'

"In the morning the radio got busy again. The senior officer from each plane was to report personally to the Air Commodore if possible. But with every machine there must remain at least one man capable of destroying it if necessary and of tending to any injured. The Commodore's position would be indicated by a smoke signal.

"Five minutes later a thin column of greasy black smoke rose to the southeast of us. I made ready to go. Franz looked dubiously at the ice-rimmed pools among the tussocks.

"'Sooner you than me,' he said. 'Go carefully. It's the kind of ground that can swallow a man.'

"More than a hundred of us came to that meeting, and a more bewildered lot of men never gathered. But even that pitch of consternation was raised by the return of a party of scouts. They had been sent to the hilltop with glasses and instruments. They showed us on a map the position their reckonings gave. They were unanimous in their figures, but more bewildered than we, for the point they had determined lay only a few seconds west of the Greenwich Meridian, almost on the Kent-Surrey border. Where the swamp and marsh stretched out toward the northern hills should have lain the city of London.

"One man who knew London well went further. He claimed that a hill upon which their glasses had shown them a cluster of huts among the trees stood in the exact geographical position of Ludgate Hill, and that a green mound further west and close beside the river was identical with the position of Westminster Abbey. Furthermore, observations taken with a range finder had supported him completely.

"The radio experts managed to get into touch with the part of the fleet which had not been forced down. It seems that after the sudden blackout about a third

of our machines remained in the air unharmed. They did not understand what had happened to the rest of us, and were thrown into confusion. They lost their bearings, for though they could see the Thames, they could not identify any of the reaches. We gathered that there had been not only confusion but a near panic. It was not clear who took command, but someone had ordered a retreat.

"On the way back they dropped many of their bombs in the sea to lighten the machines. They saw no ships lights. The Belgian coast was in complete darkness, and—most worrying of all—their radio could not make contact with their bases. The ether was dead save for communications between themselves.

"They crossed an utterly blacked out Belgium, flying entirely on their instruments. They crossed the Meuse still without answer from their base. Beyond the frontier they found Germany as black as Belgium had been—incredibly and deathly black. In spite of desperate messages, not a landing field was lit. Orders went out for the survivors of squadrons to make for their own aerodromes. The main part of the fleet headed on toward Cologne.

"They found the Rhine familiarly turning and twisting northward—but Cologne they did not find. Then petrol began to run

short, and the last order was: 'Every man for himself.'

"Now they were in a worse state than we were. Most of the men had taken to parachutes and were scattered over a large area without means of communication. They believed that almost all their planes were total wrecks. The bomber in touch with us had been lucky. It was resting in the treetop two or three miles from Cologne—but where Cologne should have been there was nothing but dense forest."

Chapter VII Unexpected Aid

The German pilot went on to tell Martin of the days and weeks which followed, which resulted in this camp. Of how out of the early welter of speculation it was Ernst Groener who emerged with the greatest following. He was a physicist of considerable standing, and unsubstantiated though his theories were, they did recognize all the known facts.

Groener, basing his view on the conception of extra-dimensional time, held that it was no less possible theoretically to project an object into free time than into free-space.

They had, he maintained, flown into something which had jerked them into another groove of time, or another part of the same groove.

As an explanation of the fact that some of the planes had suffered and others not, he suggested that the instrument causing the jerk was some kind of active field, and that those which had encountered the field head-on had survived partly or entirely unharmed, while others, touching it obliquely and remaining for an appreciable period half in and half out of its influence had suffered since the revolutions of the two time phases, though similar, did not exactly coincide.

That, Martin's informant admitted, was about as far as he had been able to follow Groener's theory. The mathematical backing of his arguments, though it impressed those who knew about such things, had conveyed little to him.

Martin listened without comment. He had to be careful not to give himself away while at the back of his mind he was wondering how Judson would take the theory. It could explain a number of puzzling points. The notion of the slightly dissimilar rotation of the two time phases, for instance, offered a tenable explanation of the odd way in which the stick held in the screen had been broken off. That sounds were faintly audible through it might be due to air passing through in pulsations and thus transmitting the sound.

"And the natives?" Martin

asked. "How do they take all this?"

"Oh, they don't like it at present, of course. You could hardly expect them to. So far we've been taking all the time, and we've not been able to give them any of the benefits of civilization in return yet. But they're a peaceful lot on the whole, and don't give much trouble."

Martin underwent a sudden change of mood. The utter impossibility of the situation came over him with a rush, swamping his acceptance entirely. He frowned.

"But this gets more fantastic than ever—I mean, it just can't be so. This is England, and I have no alternative to offer to the time theory. But if you are going to make these changes and build up a civilization there'll be something left to show for it; some signs of your influence are bound to remain."

"Of course, If not, why should we do it?"

"But they can't, they don't. Archeologists would have found at least traces of them."

The young man looked puzzled, then he face cleared. He laughed.

Do you mean to say that you've been thinking that these dirty, hut dwelling savages are your ancestors?"

"But isn't that what you've been telling me?" said Martin, perplexedly.

"Heavens no, man. They're your descendants."

Looking up, I saw that the girl who had brought the food was standing some six feet behind the opposite chair. How long she had been there, listening, he could not tell. She caught his eye, laid a finger on her lips, and nodded at the back of the unconscious German. Martin, glancing back quickly saw that his momentary inattention had gone unnoticed. He made idle talk.

Out of the corner of his eye he was watching the girl. Not a sound betrayed her, but she was drawing closer to the man. In her hand she held a square of rough cloth. When she was directly behind him she paused and lifted the cloth. Martin edged forward on his chair, and sat ready.

The cloth fell over his head. Martin was round the table in a flash. His left hand grabbed the hand which went to the pistol holster. His right shot up to the man's jaw. There was weight behind it, and the other fell limply back in his chair. The girl backed half frightened across the room and beckoned him urgently. He delayed only long enough to take the pistol before he followed.

She led the way through the inner room, scrambled through

its glassless window, and dropped crouched into the grass beneath. When he had joined her she raised her head and looked cautiously about, then, with a tug at his sleeve, she slipped away to the left and down the bank of the stream. Martin followed without hesitation, and bending low to keep beneath the level of the banks trudged against the current behind her.

They kept to the stream for two hundred yards or more, until they were well screened by the woods, then they climbed out on the further bank. Still the girl said nothing, but beckoned him on. After thrusting through a few yards of bushes they came upon a narrow footpath. She stopped and pointed along the path to the north and the hills behind. Then, still without a word, she turned and went back swiftly by the way they had come.

Martin stood without moving for some moments. The whole affair had bewildered him by its suddenness and unexpectedness. What reason could she have for rescuing him, a stranger, from people who were, after all, more kint to him than she was? Yet her manner showed that she knew what she was about: lacking any other advice he could do no better than to follow hers. He started toward the hills.

A quarter of a mile further on a

movement to one side of the path caught his eye. He leveled his pistol at the bushes.

"Come out of that," he ordered.

"You needn't shoot me, Martin," said Sheilah, as she stepped on to the path.

Chapter VIII Sheilah's Story

"We shall have to stop somewhere till it gets light," Sheilah said.

Little as he liked the idea, Martin had to assent. The light was failing fast: beneath the trees it was already so dark that the way was hard to see. They must be, he reckoned, about halfway up the hillside by now, though hemmed in by the trees it was little better than a guess.

The plan was to make for the hilltop first and then make west. When they were above the space where the annihilator stood they would turn downhill again and come to it from the north. It was a longer way round, but the certainty that the pursuit would have set out along the lower path as soon as Martin's escape was discovered forced them to take it.

They left the track reluctantly at a point where the trees were thinner. In a few moments they were safe from the chance sight of anyone using it, and Martin was breaking off small branches to make a couch.

"And now," he said, sitting down beside her, "perhaps you'll be kind enough to explain just what's happened—and how you come to be capering about in that fancy dress."

Sheilah looked down at her clothes. There was still light enough to show the clumsy, smock-like dress of unbleached wool and the crude, soft leather sandals on her feet.

"It's not becoming, is it?" she said. "But it couldn't be helped."

"Explain," demanded Martin. "This affair's gone all wrong. I set out as a rescue party of one after you; and end up by owing my own rescue to you. It's all thoroughly untraditional."

Sheilah chuckled.

"All right, but I expect you've guessed all the first part. How that great bearded brute suddenly appeared while I was experimenting, and dragged me through the screen after him?"

"Yes, I supposed that was about what had happened," Martin admitted.

"Well, the next thing I knew, I was sprawling on the grass. He'd fallen too, but he was still holding my wrist. After half a minute or so he got up and dragged me up with him. He stood staring at me in a puzzled way as if he didn't quite know what to do next. His mind evidently worked slowly, but mine was going quickly.

"I looked over his shoulder as if I could see someone coming, and he fell for it right away. As he turned his head I bent and bit his arm and wrenched my hand away. Then I turned and ran toward where I knew the screen must be. The yard or two's start I had should have been enough; it could not be much more than that from where we had fallen. In a few steps I should have come back on our own lawn, but I ran twice as far as I expected, and nothing happened.

"I stopped helplessly and let the man catch me, for I guessed why it was. Somebody had heard me call, and the first thing he had done when he got to the lawn was to turn the projector off and destroy my chance of getting back.

"The bearded man was more careful after that. He kept hold of my wrist until we were well in the woods, and then he made me walk in front. We went quite slowly. He seemed to be dawdling on purpose: in fact, he was.

After we had gone some miles and crossed a cultivated field he deliberately turned off the path and waited there till it got dark. Before we went on he tied my wrists together, put his finger on his lips, and pressed the point of a very sharp arrow against my back. We came into the village quietly and got to one of the huts

not far from the bridge, without meeting anyone.

"It was a filthy hovel and the smell of the whole place was nauseating. He lit a few sticks in the fireplace to give us some light, then he made me sit down on a dirty pile of straw, and fastened my ankles together with coarse cord. After that he freed my hands and gave me something to eat: it was nasty stuff, but I was hungry, and I ate it.

"I found that I was less afraid of him now. Whatever he intended to do, he showed no signs of being ill-disposed towards me. Evidently he had some plan which involved keeping me hidden, and I tried to find out what it was.

"When I talked he listened with a puzzled expression. And I was as perplexed by his reply, for in amongst it I heard a few intelligible English words though they were twisted by an unfamiliar pronunciation. It wasn't easy to get meanings across, but we managed to make a few things clear to one another. I understood, for instance, that I was not to show myself outside the hut or it would in some way be the worse for me—though just what would happen was not at all clear. But I could not discover what he intended to do, nor who he and his people were.

"After an hour or so he seemed to get tired of trying to talk. He

tied my wrists together again, and with a final warning against being seen or heard, he left me. No more than two or three minutes after he had gone out a girl slipped in.

"She was the girl who helped you this afternoon. She stood in the middle of the beaten earth floor looking down at me with interest, but without surprise—which suggested that our arrival in the village had not been so secret after all. We faced one another for a while, then she began to speak carefully and, to my astonishment, in German.

"We talked for perhaps two hours. Many of the things I wanted to know she couldn't tell me, but she did explain a great deal which had been perplexing me. And I learned something about her.

"She was the wife, according to tribal custom, of the man who had brought me there. This hut had been her home until four months before when the three Germans had come. She could not tell me where they had come from, but by this time I had a pretty good idea. Not long after their arrival the leader had noticed her and suggested a change of domicile. Apparently without hesitation or scruples she had gone to the German, leaving her husband to shift for himself. She had, she said, never thought much of him, anyway.

"There was very little fuss about it. Whatever the village people think of the Germans' intrusion, they are awed by them and too much afraid of their weapons to object actively to anything they may decide to do. They gave a demonstration of pistol practice soon after they came, and that was enough to make even an outraged husband think twice before starting trouble. So the girl continued to live peacefully with the leader.

"But that did not prevent her from keeping a prudent eye on her ex-husband's behavior. She had no idea what was in his mind concerning me, but she meant to find out. For the present she warned me against trying to escape. It was unlikely that I would succeed in getting clear of the village unseen, and if I did I should be unable to find my way through the forests in the dark. With that, she left me, promising to come again next day.

"The bearded man returned not long after she had gone. He barely glanced at me. After throwing some wood on the fire, he lay down on a pile of straw on the other side of the room and went to sleep.

"The next morning—this morning, that is—he got up early, gave me a bowl of a kind of porridge, ate some himself, and then

went out. And that's the last I saw of him.

"It was after noon when the girl came at last. She said she had been delayed by the arrival of a new man whom the rest called an Englishman. There wasn't much difficulty in recognizing you from her description.

"She had brought me this dress and sandals like her own so that I could at a distance pass as one of the villagers, and the only hesitation I felt about changing into them was on account of their being so very secondhand. It didn't take me long to do it, and then she was ready for us to leave—but I wasn't, quite.

" 'Look here,' I told her in German, 'I'm as anxious to go as you are to get rid of me, but this Englishman is a friend of mine. If I go, he goes, too. You've got to get him away somehow, or you don't get rid of me.'

"Apparently it never crossed her mind that the German might, if offered the choice, prefer her company to mine. She had taken the opposite view flatteringly for granted, just as her ex-husband had.

"She looked distressed.

" 'It will be difficult,' she said.

" 'All the same, it's got to be done,' I told her. 'If you don't bring him to me, I shall come back.'

"And—well, it took her some time, but she did it. I don't know

how, but you do, so it's your turn to do the talking for a bit." Sheilah ended.

It was more than an hour after sunrise when they reached the smooth grass near the top of the hill. They climbed no more since there would be a risk of exposing themselves on the skyline. Instead, they turned west, keeping along the flank of the hill, a little above the tree level.

It was easy going over the open ground; a light breeze was in their faces and an early morning freshness put a better complexion on the world.

"Did the Germans tell you their tale of how this state of things came to be?" Sheilah asked.

"No," Martin admitted.

"Well, the girl told me. It's the story of the devil-birds who lived in the land beyond the sunrise. It seems that the devil-birds' lands were also overcrowded. The devil-birds had built nests on top of one another as the men had built their huts, but they reached the sky and couldn't go any further. They began to want to build and to lay their eggs in the lands this side of the sunrise. But the men said 'no.' They wanted all their land to grow food on for themselves and their children, and that the devil-birds would be shot if they came.

"But the devil-birds went on complaining about overcrowding and at the same time laying more

eggs and hatching out more families until their land could not support them. Then they came across the sunrise. They came in flocks so huge that they filled the sky, and they roared with anger so that the whole world trembled. They spat fire onto the land below. So mighty were their droppings that the earth staggered as they fell and the piles of huts were shaken down. A vapour arose from the droppings so terrible that all who breathed it died at once. They scattered poison into the sky, and the sky poisoned the earth.

"Then the devil-birds went back, but the poison stayed. It was in the air, in the water, in the food. The skins of men and women who took the poison came out in black patches. They went mad, and died in agony—and the next day all their friends and families showed the black patches, and the braver ones killed themselves because they had seen what was going to happen. People died by the thousands, by the millions.

"Only a few small islands went untouched by the plague; places where the prevailing wind was off the sea, keeping the poisoned air away. The people on the islands shut themselves off from the mainland and from one another, and waited.

"Some of the smaller islands could not support their inhabi-

tants, but any men who could be found brave enough to go to the mainland did not return. So the islands communities grew less, though they hung on.

"The legend says that it was several generations before at last a man returned to tell them that it was possible to live on the mainland again. Probably that's an exaggeration, but it implies a long time, and there were pitifully few of them left. Anyway, it shows you what I mean by the survivors of a civilization."

"Gas, disease-bombs, air-born bacilli," said Martin.

"Yes, a plague, started deliberately, and then getting out of control—probably by an unexpected mutation—so that it spread everywhere, wiping out its creators as well as their enemies."

"Could it? It seems impossible. It may have been some local affliction greatly exaggerated—I mean, think of the tales of the flood. After all, it's only a legend."

"Only a legend," she agreed, "but it's a remarkable legend for a simple people to have invented. Have you a better means of accounting for all this?" She waved an arm to include the whole wilderness of forest.

"They walked on for a time in silence.

"Then Juddy's Annihilator did not—will not—stop war," Martin said.

"No. It's just another new weapon to be counteracted," Sheilah said.

"And the people in the village—I wonder if they will grow up just to destroy themselves in the end?"

"Who can say? Their minds may develop differently; they may lack suicidal will to war. They may consider the fighter a dishonorable man and a bad citizen. They may, unlike us, see their danger before it is too late."

"But you don't sound very hopeful."

"Hopeful! Why should I be hopeful? Hasn't civilization after civilization climbed up and then fallen down this sink of war? I thought that in helping Tommy I was doing something which might help to change all that—now I know I wasn't. It makes me feel that the whole stock is tainted." She turned to look up into his face. "I will marry you, Martin, if you still want me. But I don't think I want to bring children into this kind of world."

Sheilah stopped, and pointed across the valley.

"This is far enough. You see those two hill crests exactly in line. That's how they look from the hill behind the house."

"There should be a path." Martin said.

She nodded. "I remember. It ran up the west edge. Let's look a bit further."

They found a track emerging from the tree belt a hundred yards further on. It was little used, but there was no other, and they took it.

The track wound to take advantage of open ground, and they passed cautiously down the sides of two spaces similar to, but smaller than the one they sought. At the edge of the third Martin stopped. He could see the head and shoulders of a man who stood in the open. Sheilah touched his sleeve.

"It's the man who caught me."

He nodded. The man had known where to come. There was not much to be feared from him alone; the question was, had he brought the Germans with him?

The projector, he remembered, was not far from the top end of the open ground. To make a way through the trees to the left would bring them nearer to it and also give a better view of the whole place.

The going was bad. Brambles and thorn brushes tore their clothes and faces. After a yard or two Sheilah's legs were lacerated and bleeding, and her hair was continually tangling in small branches. In spite of their care Martin felt that a herd of cattle could scarcely have made more noise. After twenty-five or thirty yards of zig-zagging to avoid the worst thickets he led the way downhill with still more caution.

Sheilah kept close behind. Progress was slow and painful. At last he reached a point where it was possible to look out between the leaves.

He could see the double track of dead branches he had laid to mark the path to the screen; the screen itself should now be between him and them if Judson had obeyed instructions and kept it up—a bare thirty feet from the top fringe of bushes. The bearded man was also visible.

Martin turned his head slowly to whisper directions to Sheilah. She rose on tiptoe to see the ground beyond, and as she moved a branch went off like a cracker under her foot. The effect on the bearded man was immediate. He waved an arm at someone out of sight further down the hill, and started toward their hiding place.

There was nothing for it but to make a dash. Martin flung himself through the last few yards of bushes. The oncoming man threw something which whizzed past his head: there was a thud just behind him. He fired wildly, and saw the man stop. He glanced back to see Sheilah lying where the missile had felled her.

"As he picked her up he caught sight of the three Germans racing up the hill toward him, beyond the screen. Holding Sheilah, he ran headlong down the hill in their direction. He saw them come to a stop, looking puzzled. Then

the sun seemed suddenly to leap higher in the sky. There was the same strange twisting fall that he had felt before. Trees and sky whirled before his eyes—and he dropped on a smooth lawn.

Martin scrambled to his feet, and staggered. There came one last message from the world beyond the screen: a bullet whistled

past him, ricocheted from an iron seat, and broke a window in the house behind.

He reached swiftly for the switch. The red light winked out. The screen was down.

He picked Sheilah up in his arms, and walked to meet the men who were running from the house. The End

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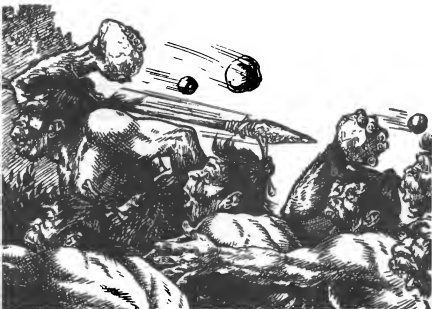
Battle



in the Dawn

By **MANLY WADE WELLMAN**

Until fairly recently, most s-f writers—except for Chad Oliver—seem never to have heard of Dr. L.S.B. Leakey's suggestion that man probably originated not in Europe or Asia, but in darkest Africa. As a consequence, now that Leakey has gained ground, most anthropological fiction before him—much of it set in Stone Age Europe—begins to look a little restricted when re-read in the light of modern thought. However, a few magnificent exceptions still shine remarkably bright—Manly Wade Wellman's "Hok" stories, for example, in the first of which the Hunter from the south dares to challenge the Gnorrls of the north—who can swat a man dead like a fly!



STONE-AGE Europe was spacious, rich and uncrowded; but there could be only one race of rulers.

Homo Neanderthalensis must have grown up there from the beginning, was supreme and plentiful as the last glaciers receded. His bones have been found from Germany to Gibraltar, and his camps and flints and fire-ashes. We reconstruct his living image—burley and stooped, with a great protruding muzzle, beetling brows, no chin and no brow. Perhaps he was excessively hairy—hardly a man, but more than a brute. Fire was his, and the science of flint-chipping. He buried his dead brothers, apparently believing in a hereafter, even a deity. He could think, perhaps speak. He could fight, too.

When real men first came through the eastern mountain passes or out of the great valley now drowned by the Mediterranean, battle ensued. The invaders were *Homo Sapiens*, in body and spirit like us, their children. They could not parley with the abhorrent foe they found; there could be no rules of warfare, no truces or treaties, no mercy to the vanquished. Such conflict could die only when the last adversary died.

It must have been a struggle

generations long. Was it not full of daring, despair, sacrifice, triumph? Was not the conquest the greatest, because the most fundamental, in the history of the race? No champions of mankind ever bore a greater responsibility those those first little bands who crossed, all unaware, the borders of Neanderthal country.

With one such band, at the moment of such crossing, our story begins—

Chapter I

The Land of the Gnorris

THE southern country had come to hold too few game herds, too many hostile bands of fellow-hunters; hence the family's spring migration, many days' journey into the north which these days grew warmer than their fathers had known it.

The particular bright morning found the whole nine scattered. A foolish deer, grazing too close, bounded away with a javelin in its shoulder, and the swiftest runners led the chase with the rest trailing behind. So from horizon to horizon and beyond, the pursuers went, with flecks of blood to point the way across rich green meadows, and hunger to quicken moccasined feet. The sun had reached zenith and passed when the first of the hunters, gaining the top of a little knoll, saw that the prey had fallen and died just beyond.

That first-comer was the eldest son of the wandering household, and the tallest and swiftest. He was as strong as the leopard whose pelt he wore for single garment, and his smooth young skin showed tanned and healthy with good outdoor living. His lion-tawny hair had been cut shoulder length and was bound back from his shrewd face with a snake-skin fillet. His chin, plucked clean of beard as custom decreed with bachelors, jutted squarely. His mouth was wide and good-humored beneath a straight nose, and his gray eyes opened widely, clearly. In one hand he swung a stone-bladed axe, and a loop at his shoulder held the mate to the javelin that had pierced the deer. His name, and he hoped to make it great, was Hok.

Pausing thus, Hok grinned triumphantly for just the half of an instant. Then he eyes narrowed and his lips drew tight. Something dark and shaggy crouched on the far side of the fallen animal. A bear? Hok's free hand flashed backward, twitching the second javelin from its strap.

Behind came the patter of other feet, and a comradely panting. That was Zhik, a younger half-brother and favorite companion. Not as tall as Hok, nor as old by three years, the stripling nevertheless was sturdy and handsome. Hurrying from behind, he poised a spear of his own.

At that moment the shaggy thing rose from the side of the deer, rose on two legs to face them. It was not a bear.

Barely thirty paces separated the youths from the creature that disputed their right to the meat.

It had hands and feet, coarser and larger than Hok's own; it was a head shorter than he, but broader; it wore no clothes, and coarse hair thatched shoulders, chest and knotted limbs. Then its eyes grappled Hok's across the intervening space.

Shrewd were those eyes, in a broad, shallow skull like the skull of a hairy lizard. Fire was in them, and intelligence and challenge. The two bright crumbs of vision, under their coarse brows, did not falter before Hok's gaze as would a beast's. Meeting the stare, startled and fierce on his own part, the hunter-youth was aware only vaguely of the rest of the face—out-flaring nostrils, a sagging lip, a hideous rank beard and forelock, ears that seemed to prick like those of a wolf.

Zhik drew in his breath, as if setting himself for the cast. "Wait," interposed Hok quickly, he did not know why.

A third human figure had come from behind—the Chief, their father and head of the party, a hunter still vigorous and swift but unable to match forever the pace of these two eldest sons. He

too, balanced a javelin ready, and at sight of the creature before them his heavy, fulvous beard gaped open in amazement.

As for curiosity itself, this last reenforcement daunted it. Slowly, clumsily, it backed away. They saw that it moved with knees bent, back hunched, arms hanging forward like an ape's. Its eyes still turned to Hok, and it was at him it blurted a suddenguttural sound of defiance. Then, turning upon broad, flat feet, it made off with awkward speed. It dropped into a fold of the meadow, remained invisible for moments, then reappeared beyond, well out of javelin range, to plunge into a thicket.

Zhik, the youngest, recovered his high spirits first. "Gnorrl!" he shouted after the fugitive, in imitation of its throaty cry. Hok laughed, and repeated, "Gnorrl!" A new word was born into man's language, a word that would be used often and fearfully in days to come.

All three moved forward, tensely cautious. It was as though they expected the slain deer to spring up, alive and savage. But it was dead enough. The Chief turned it upon its back, then drew a knife of ground buckhorn. Hok knelt to help him open the belly and peel the hide, but Zhik gazed searchingly around the horizon for long moments.

"That Gnorrl left a bad stink

here," announced the Chief. "Let us drag the meat away." They did so, but still smelled, or fancied that they smelled, the vanished monster.

The rest of the party came up as the butchery went on—first Asha, latest wife of the Chief, a plump, handsome young woman in a doe-skin tunic, with a naked boy-baby straddling her hip; next Barp and Unn, half-grown sons of Zhik's dead mother, carrying on their unwilling shoulders part of the camp-luggage; after that Eowi, full sister to Hok, a slim and agile maiden also loaded with bundles; finally Asha's other child, the little girl Nohda, old enough to walk but not to carry any burden save her clout of hare's fur and a necklace of red seeds. As these arrived, they helped in cutting up the meat. Under the Chief's direction the four quarters, the loin and the tenderloin, the heart, the liver and the kidneys were detached and wrapped in the new hide. The ribs, head, shins and entrails remained for hyenas and ravens.

By now it was mid-afternoon, and the party went no further than a willow-fringed creek before the Old Man uttered the laconic order "camp." At once Hok and Zhik produced axes and cut long, supple willow poles. Several of these were thrust into the ground and bent together for central lash-

ing. Over them Asha and Eowi drew the tent-cover of sewn hides. Barp and Unn gathered kindling and heavier wood, and the Chief reverently produced from his belt-pouch the long, charred fire-spindle. A piece of soft, punky wood served as hearth, and upon this he twirled the spindle-point, crooning the while the ancient prayer to the fire god.

When a bright blaze had been kindled, the meat was apportioned. The Chief got, as was his right, the tenderloin. Next choice, a steak from the rear quarter, went to Asha. Hok's turn came third, and he cut slices of liver and impaled them on a green willow withe. As he put them to the fire, his sister Eowi came and squatted beside him.

"What happened?" she asked. "None of you have told, but—"

"Gnorrl!" cried Zhik, whipping himself erect and standing at gaze.

They all saw it then, far down the stream. It had crept up to watch them, and at the chorus of bewildered shouts from the campers it now shrank back into a little clump of bushes—abroad, repulsive shagginess that blended into the leafy shadow.

Hok had dropped his liver into the fire and had sprung to where javelins were planted, tip in earth, for a quick snatch. His back tingled and crawled, in the place where, with his long-ago ances-

tors, a manelike strip of hair had bristled. His eyes measured the distance to the bushes. He ached to throw a spear.

Eowi came to his side again. She had rescued his dinner from burning, and was touching it with a gingerly forefinger. "I know now without being told," she said softly. "That was the danger. What was it, a man?"

"No," returned Hok, his eyes still prodding the clump. "It was a Gnorrl. Zhik made the word."

The Chief was laughing loudly and carelessly, for the sake of the frightened children. After a moment, the others joined in his merriment. Barp and Unn whooped bravely at the silent bush-clump, waving their axes and exhorting the Gnorrl to show himself and be slain. Hok returned to his cooking, tried a lump of liver experimentally, and finally ate with relish.

But as the sun drew to the horizon's edge, Hok's uneasy mood came back upon him. The Chief and Zhik betrayed something of the same feeling, for they brought wood in great billets and built the small fire into a large, bright one. Hok sought serenity in toil, looking to his weapons. Did not the edge of his axe need retouching to make it sharper? With a bone chisel he gouged away at a tiny flake of flint. But this aided neither the appear-

ance nor the keenness of the weapon. He started suddenly.

It had grown dark as he handled his gear, and he thought that something heavy and stealthy moved outside the patch of fire-light. He felt as he had felt in childhood, when his mother, the Chief's first wife, still lived and told of how her dead grandfather had moaned outside the tent to be let in.

The Chief, who likewise felt the need for occupation, tightened the already perfect lashings of his javelin. "We shall sleep outside tonight," he decreed. "Zhik, too. The women and children in the tent, and a big fire kept up until morning. One of us will watch."

"Well said," agreed Hok. "I am not sleepy. I shall watch first."

It developed that Zhik was not sleepy, either, but Hok was the elder and had made first claim. The Chief then raised his voice, calling "Silence!" At this customary signal for bed-preparations, Asha, carrying her baby, entered the tent. Eowi and little Nohda followed, and then Barp and Unn, who took their places at either side of the doorway. The Chief and Zhik lay down by the fireside.

Hok, left to his vigil, fought hard against the perplexing sensation of being watched. He tried to say that these were fancies.

The chill at his backbone came because it was a spring night, and he had come farther north than ever before. The uneasiness was because of the strangeness. Any prudent hunter did well to watch, of course; if the Gnorrl came . . .

It did not come, and at last he grew sleepy. The stars overhead told him that night's noon was at hand. He nudged Zhik into wakefulness, and lay down.

He dropped into sound slumber, for moments only as it seemed—then started to his feet with a wild, tremulous wail for fear and pain ringing through his head. Catlike, he commanded himself upon the instant of rousing, could see, stand and clutch at his javelin.

It was dawn. The crying came from the direction of the tent. Something huge and dark was carrying something small that struggled and screamed. The Chief, too, was there running with axe uplifted.

But a shaggy arm drove out like a striking snake. Hok saw the Chief spin and fall heavily. The Gnorrl—it was that, of course—fled with its pize.

When Zhik and Hok had gained their father's side he was dead. His skull had been beaten in, as though by the paw of a bear.

Chapter II Blood for Blood

The others were out of the

tent by now. There was considerable hysterical weeping, notably by Asha, who had lost baby and husband in almost the same instant of time. Hok, bound by racial custom not to speak to his stepmother, told Eowi to comfort the distracted woman. In the gray dawn he and Zhik reconnoitered.

A look told them everything. Strange, enormous tracks behind the tent, a slit in the hide covering—the Gnorri, plainly, had crept up here. By guess or scent it located the sleeping place of Asha's baby son. A single strong rip with a sharp flint would give egress to a hand. The Chief, the only camper awake, had been slapped to death like a fly—the strength of the Gnorri must be enormous. Had Hok pursued blindly, he might have died as well.

The brothers looked pallidly at each other. "You are the Chief now," Zhik said.

Hok had not thought of that, but it was true. He, with manhood barely upon him, must be leader, defender and father of this handful. The realization steadied him, and he made plans for the space of two breaths, while Zhik waited expectantly.

"I am going to take up the trail," said Hok at last. "Stay here and bury him." He gazed down at his dead father. "Heap stones, to keep the beasts away. Then break camp. Keep your wea-

pons in hand, and have Barp and Unn do the same. Yes, and Eowi too, and Asha when she stops crying. Be ready to fight for your lives."

"I understand nodded Zhik.

"When you are ready to march, wait here and watch. I will make a damp-wood fire. When you see its steam, come and find me there."

Zhik nodded as before, started to ask a question, but tactfully paused. Hok knew what was on his mind, and issued a final command.

"This trail leads north. If I make no signal by noon, you will know that I will never make signals again. You, Zhik, will be the Chief. Lead the others south."

"South?" echoed the younger brother. "Where there is danger?"

"Maybe the danger is less than what we have found."

He turned away without waiting for further comment from Zhik. He saw to his javelins, slung them in place, thrust axe and knife into his girdle. Neither speaking or looking back, he strode quickly out of the camp, picked up the spoor of the raider and followed it at a trot.

The footprints of the Gnorri betokened a long, wedge-shaped sole, point-heeled and splay-toed. Its greatest weight was at the outer edge—Hok remembered

how grotesquely the legs had bowed. From force of habit he gauged the length and tempo of the stride, the considerable bulk supported on these strange feet.

The sun was well up by this time, and he glanced quietly but expertly around. The country was all rolling meadow, well grown with grass and heather—rain must fall plentifully. Far to the north he saw wooded heights, from which a river wound its way. He made out distant dark spots at the brink—wild cattle drinking, and a rhinoceros or two, proof of the good hunting to be found. Upon his right, the east, ran at an angle the silver thread of the creek beside which his people had made camp, and he could descry a little ravine through which it ran to join the river.

The track before him doubled back toward the creek and into the ravine. Cautiously Hok approached, his javelin poised. He did not enter the cleft, but scouted along its lip. Where it opened at the riverside he picked up again the tracks of the Gnorrl. A gout of blood showed beside them and, farther on another.

The trail led him along the sand of the river's brink to where, winding upstream around a rocky height, it was lost to view. He paused a moment under the high rock before turning the corner. Breeze brought him a tiny wreath of smoke.

"The Gnorrl uses fire," he said to himself. "It cooks."

No question what cooking it did this morning. More blood spotted the track at juncture of bluff and river. Here were many footmarks of varying degrees of freshness, easily classifiable as made by three pairs of feet—two large, one smaller. Hok slipped gingerly around the point of the bank.

Just beyond the steep slope of rock curved away from the water. It made a crescent-shaped open space, tufted here and there with grass, almost entirely enclosed by the bluff and the river. At the center point of the bank's inward curve, at twice Hok's height above the sandy soil's level, opened the wide mouth of a cavern. A tall man, standing on its floor, might touch the roof by jumping, and across the opening from side to side would take four considerable stretchings of the legs. A jagged shelf extended above this grotto, filling it with shadow, and an ancient water channel descended diagonally from the cavern's lower lip to the ground, making a natural runway up which two men might mount abreast. The air was full of the musky odor Hok had first known beside the slain deer.

This was the den of the Gnorrl.

Hok's heart drummed part-ridge-like within him, but he advanced without hesitation. His

nose curled with revulsion at the stench. He got a better view of the cavern, and from its shadowy interior came forth new wisps of smoke, laden with the smell of roasting.

He gained the foot of the runway—deep and narrow and not as steep as the bank to left and right. It was worn as smooth as Hok's palm; the feet of Gnorrls must have trod it for uncountable years. Hok set up a fierce yell, beating with his javelin shaft on the stone.

"Hi, hi! Gnorrl, Gnorrl! Come out, baby-killer!"

He heard movement in the cave overhead. A deep rumble made reply. Hok laughed scornfully: "Gnorrl! Come out and eat a javelin!"

Something crept into view at the lip of the opening—a dark, coarse hand, matted with hair, that grasped the shoulder of rock beside the deep-worn runway. Above it peeped the low, bearded face of the Gnorrl.

It looked like the one Hok had seen yesterday, the one that had wanted to fight for the deer's carcass. This time he refused to shrink from its biting gaze. "Come out, Gnorrl!" he urged. "Show me your body!"

As though it understood, the thing rose into view. It swung a stick abruptly; from that stick's cleft end a stone whizzed, over Hok's instinctively ducking head.

The Gnorrl charged down after the missile, lumbering swift as a rhinoceros.

Hok let fly with his javelin. The upward angle was strange, but he knew his weapon. There was a hum in the air, an abrupt *chock* as the stone point drove home, and the Gnorrl fell on its face. It came sliding down the sloping way. Almost at Hok's feet it subsided quivering, blood from its gasping mouth soaking the sand.

A coughing roar sounded from above, where another Gnorrl had appeared. This was a female, almost as thickset and fearsome as her fallen mate. She saw at once what had happened. Her voice shrilled into a scream as she dashed vengefully down the narrow way.

Hok snatched his second javelin from behind his shoulder, but there was no time to flex and throw. He quickly planted the butt-end in the sand, dropped to one knee, his right hand supporting the shaft at an angle. Even as the she-Gnorrl launched herself through the air, her great hands crooked like talons for the grapple, he point-blanked the flint head into the center of her gross breast. The force of her own assault impaled her, and Hok, releasing the javelin sprang lightly to one side. She floundered down, the blood-gushing point springing into sight between her

hairy shoulder blades. Hok caught hold of the shaft just at the lashings and with a wrench pulled it clear through her body.

She still lived, trying to squirm around and clutch his ankle. He danced away, laughed, and stabbed through her eye into the brain. As she sagged into death he freed his javelin a second time and sprang across the carcass of the male to mount upward to the cave.

Inside the dark chamber crouched a halfling male cub of the Gnorrls. Its frightened face was greasy with eating, and one hand clutched a gnawed morsel. Hok darted a glance at the fire and the interrupted cooking. That one glance was enough. He set foot on the floor of the grotto, watching the young Gnorrl.

It chattered at him like a crazy monkey. Monkeylike, too, it was fuzzy of body, nervous of movement. Hok chuckled harshly. The young Gnorrl understood, tried to retreat. In a far corner of the grotto opened a small inner cave. Hok let the thing win almost to that hiding; then, still chuckling, he darted his javelin.

Just before noon, called by Hok's damp-wood smoke signal, Zhik and the others arrived. They found their new leader seated at the foot of the runway, scrubbing his weapons with sand.

"The Gnorrls are dead, all," he told them. "I have thrown all

their bodies into the river."

"Is this their cave?" asked Eowi, her eyes round.

"No," replied Hok. "It is our cave now. Get green wood, to burn and drive away their smell. In this good game country we stay."

Chapter III Skirmishing

The grotto, with its water-worn sides and floor of hard-trodden earth, was more than large enough for all the surviving members of Hok's family. In odd corners the new tenantry found the possessions of the slain Gnorrls. Near the runway were heaped throwing stones, to be flung by hand, or with a cleft stick, as Hok had seen and survived. A horizontal crack, like a natural shelf, held other stones, rather roughly chipped into tools and weapons. These included hide-scrapers that Asha and Eowi appropriated, also several almond-shaped flints, like helveless axes, to be hld in the hand.

Gnorrls, too, were learning something about the weapons of the strangers. On the morning after the first night in the cave, Zhik went for a brief scout down river and returned to say that Hok's three victims had washed ashore in the shallows not far away. Barp and Unn slipped off to see the corpses, and returned

shuddering. From the shelter of a willow clump they had seen half a dozen living Gnorrls moaning sadly over the dead. Eventually, said the frightened boys, these grotesque mourners had carried the bodies away.

"They are like men," commented Zhik. "They weep for the slain and take them away to bury them. The Gnorrls worship."

"They are evil," growled Hok, and dutifully boxed the ears of Barp and Unn, warning them to avoid all contact with Gnorrls.

Other clues to Gnorrl-life turned up in the cave, and from them Hok and Zhik deduced that the shaggy people lived in rock-sheltered communities during winter, rather wretchedly and scantily. Warm weather would set them roving in small groups again, even as true men loved to do. It had been only chance that the last three Gnorrls idled in these winter quarters.

If this was an established stronghold of the things, they would want to come back, and there would be trouble; but Hok felt that the odds lay with the defenders. The Gnorrls would have to gather upon the open half-moon of sand below, in fair view and could scale the runway only a pair at a time. The ledge above the grotto precluded attack from that quarter. Wisdom and watchfulness would do the rest.

Accordingly the young chief

announced that whenever he and Zhik were absent, Barp and Unn must keep faithful watch at the river's brink, where they could see up and down stream, while the women held themselves ready at all times to hurl spears or stones against attackers.

The next adventure with Gnorrls was Zhik's alone. He and Hok, hunting, for meat, went in opposite directions across a plain on which grazed deer and cattle. When the brothers met later in the day, Zhik was minus a javelin and trembling with rage and excitement.

He had stalked a wild cow, crept through high grass and pierced her heart with a javelin. Then, before he could come up to her, the nearby thickets had vomited Gnorrls, and he had been forced to run for his life.

It was the last lone hunt of either young man for many months. Not only did they roam together thenceforth, but they made more preparations at the cave. From leg bones of deer and bison they cut serviceable points, which they bound to straight shafts. Thus they made plenty of good javelins for throwing or stabbing. These they stacked near the runway, ready for instant use. Hok instituted target practice for Barp and Unn and the women.

But the feared attack did not

come until autumn's frosts made the mornings white. It was then that the Gnorrls tried to take back their ancient shelter.

They made a rush early in the dawn. Only Asha was awake, and had gone down to fill a skin water-bag. The hairy ones were upon her in a triumphant yelling wave. Even as Hok and Zhik started to wakefulness on their pallets at the lip of the grotto, they saw their stepmother beaten to death with stones and ragged clubs, and her limp body dragged backward out of sight beyond the shoulder of the bluff.

The girl Eowi, who had been on guard but had gone into the rear of the cave, rushed back and hurled the first vengeful missile. It was one of the bone-tipped javelins, and it split the broad face of a Gnorrl as he gained the very foot of the runway. He sat down, howling through a sudden mask of blood, and his blind wrigles blocked for the moment a concerted charge. Meanwhile the open space below seemed thronged with the enemy, and into the heart of them Hok and Zhik threw spear after spear. No need to take careful aim at such close quarters; four of the besiegers were down in as many breaths, and the rest gave back. The occupants of the cave shouted their defiance, and Barp threw a lucky shaft that pierced the shoulder of a Gnorrl slow in retreating.

Screaming loudly, the wounded monster sprang into the water and wallowed there. Again the caveholders yelled, as at a good omen.

Five human battlers were in action—Hok, his three brothers and Eowi. The Gnorrls numbered six times as many, and seemed to have some sort of attacking order. One or two growled commandingly, and made gestures as if to show how few were the enemy. A volley of stones spattered the defenders, and Unn yelled in startled pain. There was another dash for the runway.

This time it was almost taken. Barp, Unn and Eowi threw their javelins too quickly and, although the casts took toll, a flood of Gnorrls came scrambling up the narrow channel in the rock. Hok and Zhik, who had reserved their casts, now skewered each his Gnorrl, but the others swarmed over the fallen and up to the very level of the cave floor. It looked like defeat, destruction. Desperately Hok slashed with his axe of flint, hewing down the foremost attacker. Then it was Eowi who turned the tide of battle.

She had snatched a blazing stick from the breakfast fire, and ran to thrust it into the snarling face of the next Gnorrl.

That move was genius, or luck, or both. Had the Gnorrl been killed outright, he would have fallen, and his comrades behind rushed trampling over his body

to the conflict. But as the flame kindled his rank beard, there went up from his great mouth a hideous howl of pain and terror. He toppled backward on the slope of the runway, flung out his thick arms and grappled those behind him. Crazed with fear and agony, he tried to fight his way back through the press. Two or three other Gnorrls slipped and fell. Zhik, greatly daring in his extremity, sprang upon the fallen bodies, spurning them with his moccasined feet and thrusting with a javelin at those beyond and below. A moment later the whole attack was demoralized and the Gnorrls, dragging some of their wounded, fled wildly back to the river, then along the edge and out of sight beyond the bluff.

Hok and his people waited cautiously while the morning sun lifted itself in the sky by the breadth of a hand. Then they descended to the ground and reconnoitered. The Gnorrl were not to be seen up or down river, nor on the meadow below the bluffs. On the sand lay nine of the creatures, dead or dying. Three of these had fallen upon the runway and had slid to its foot. Hok and Zhik finished the last struggles of the wounded with judicious axe-blows and hurled the bodies into the river, where they drifted quickly away.

The only loss on the side of the defenders was Asha, whose

corpse had been borne away by the retreating Gnorrls—for what purpose Hok well knew. He grimaced in revulsion at the idea, but reflected that his stepmother's flesh was a repast dearly bought. Lesser mishaps were a deep cut on his own cheek, which he could not remember sustaining, a wrenched ankle for Zhik, and a big bump on Unn's forehead from a flung stone.

The following day a heavy snow fell, and the Gnorrls menaced them no further. Undoubtedly the strange aborigines of this northern meadow-country found another shelter from the cold. Once or twice, when hunting on fair days for snow-bogged elk and bison, Hok and his brothers saw Gnorrls at a distance and were interested to see that the natural sagginess of the things was augmented by crude mantles or skirts of skin. However, there was no more fighting, no close contact even, during all the season of snow.

Several times in midwinter the cave-dwellers found themselves on the shortest of rations, but all of them were young and vigorous, and all lived to see the spring.

Hok, sauntering southward with Zhik, saw something else.

"Smoke," he pronounced, pointing afar in the direction whence they had come a year

ago. "Fire—of men, like ourselves." He looked at his brother sidewise. "You can be chief for a time—and Barp and Unn have grown. They can help hunt and guard."

"Why do you talk like this?"

"I am going south," replied Hok. "Where there are men, there will be women. I want one."

Chapter IV The Capture of Oloana

It was one of the smallest pools in the wide, dense-grown forest, a blob of shiny dark over which boughs and vines laced greenly. The girl turned over lazily upon its quiet surface, swam three strong, slow strokes to the brink and waded out.

Her golden, glistening body, its curves at once strong and graceful, would have intrigued even critical modern eyes. She shook herself, like the handsome wild thing she was, and drops showered from her like rain. Then she donned her single garment of soft doeskin, that looped over one round shoulder, covered her young bosom's swell, fitted her waist and dropped like a short skirt to mid-thigh. Her slender feet slid themselves into sandals of well-tanned bison leather. On her right arm she fastened a sort of bracelet, strung out of small gay shells. Finally she rummaged in a belt-pouch, brought out a shallow-toothed comb of

deer-horn and, leaning back against a half-rotten stump, began to arrange her great, damp cloud of blue-black hair.

Oloana, daughter of Chief Zorr and beloved of his giant lieutenant, Kimri, feared nothing. The huntsmen of her little tribe had long ago driven the beasts before them, even in this northern edge of the forest. As for human meance, who would dare so much as look at her, for all her new ripeness of beauty?

Yet someone was looking. He lounged easily in a tree-fork overhead, lithe and motionless as a leopard in ambush. Unlike Oloana's dark folk, he boasted a head of hair the color of a lion's mane. His face, clean of beard, was ruddy rather than sallow brown, and a scar across one young cheek added sternness to his undeniable good looks. He wore moccasins instead of sandals, and the fashion of his axe, dagger and javelins was strange to the people of that forest. He was Hok, who had come south to find a woman.

His gray fighter's eyes sparkled with honest relish, and his wide mouth spread wider in a grin of approval. His big hands opened and closed, as though eager to seize what he saw. Noiselessly he rose erect on his perch, twitching a javelin from his shoulder-loop. The long shaft whizzed in the air, and thudded into the stump beside the girl.

Oloana screamed in panic, tried to spring away—in vain. The sharp-point had pinned fast the edge of her skirt. Even as she struggled to tear loose, a happy laugh rang out above her. A long-limbed, bright-maned demon fell out of the branchy heavens, lighted easily upon moccasined toes, and caught her by the elbow.

"You are mine," he announced, in a language similar to her own.

She screamed again, and struck at him. Her fist rang on a chest as hard as wood. He laughed the louder, plucked away the tight-wedged javelin as easily as Oloana would have gathered a wild-flower. Still struggling and shouting in fear and rage, she felt herself whirled lightly up and across his shoulder. Then he ran.

For another, deeper shout answered Oloana's appeal, to be echoed by more shouts. Her people, the dark forest men, had heard her and were coming. Hope came to the girl and added fire to her battle for freedom. Hok chuckled and fled the faster.

Still more loud came the pursuing cries. Racing figures could be seen among the thickets behind—black beards and brandished weapons.

"No javelins!" bellowed one great voice, the voice of Zorr, Oloana's chieftain father. "You might kill her. Run him down!"

"We have him!" howled back the gigantic Kimri, who was to

marry Oloana. "He's running toward the ravine!"

It was true. A narrow, ancient creek had cut deeply into the loamy floor of the forest, and there the ravisher must perforce come to bay. Oloana ceased her cries, fiercely exulting over the imminent reckoning. She heard Hok's sharp gasp of surprise as he spied the ravine, a good five times the length of a man across and nearly double that in depth.

But he did not slacken his pace. Once more the stolen girl screamed, screamed in new and mortal terror, as Hok raced to the very rim of the chasm and sprang out over it.

For one heart-smothering moment Oloana stared down at the rock-torn current far below. They must fall; be crushed—but her captor's free hand had seized a dangling vine. Their weight carried them flying onward, upward, while the far bank rushed to meet them. Hok's feet found the brink, clutched solid footing, and he paused to look back.

The black-beards were lining the other bank, cursing and raving. Several lifted their spears, Hok laughed and swung Oloana's body before him.

"Do not throw!" commanded Zorr anxiously. "Cross after him!"

"None of you dare the leap," taunted Hok.

"I will follow!" screamed Kim-

ri, towering among his fellows.

"Follow, then," laughed Hok and plunged anew into the forest, dragging Oloana by the wrist.

For eternities, it seemed, he urged her to match his tireless lope. She ceased to struggle and drag backward—her strength was nothing to his. They came into strange country, beyond the northernmost limits of Zorr's latest northern foray. Just as the girl wondered if her captor would never grow weary, he came to an abrupt halt.

They stood in a little clearing among birches, with a trickle of water crossing it, and to oneside, a rocky hummock with a yawning cave entrance.

"We camp here," said Hok, Oloana's eyes threw black hate-fire and her bosom heaved as she probed her mind for names bad enough to call him.

"You dared to steal me!" she flug out.

"You are a woman," he replied, as if that explained everything. "I am a man. My name is Hok."

"A man?" she echoed scornfully. "With no beard?"

"With my people, men without mates pluck out their beards. Now I shall grow mine."

Her voice trembled with rage and contempt. "You have the face of a boy. Kimri will crush your skull like a toadstool."

"Let him try," said Hok. "Come into the cave."

"I won't. Not with you."

He lifted her from her feet and carried her in. She screamed once more, though help was far away, and her flying fists glanced from his chest and face like hailstones from a cliffside. Setting her carefully upon the floor of the cave, he barred the door with his own great body.

"You are beautiful," he informed her. "What is your name?"

She sprang at him and bit his shoulder. Snorting, he pushed her away.

"We had better rest," he decreed. "Both of us."

Deep night found a fire blazing at the cave-mouth. Hok had speared a grouse in the clearing, and was grilling it on a twig. When it was done, he offered the choicest morsel to Oloana.

She shook her head, her eyes bright with tears. "When will you let me go?" she pleaded for the hundredth time.

"I have said that you are mine. I am a chief in the country to the north. We will go there."

"Go there?" she repeated. She began to edge toward him.

"What is your name?" demanded Hok once more.

"Oloana," she breathed, coming closer. He gazed in happy surprise.

"Oloana. That is a beautiful name. When we—"

Out flew her hand. She caught one of his javelins from where

it leaned at the entrance to the cave. Whirling it, she plunged the point straight at her heart. Hok's hand, still clutching a shred of his supper, flew a thought more swiftly. The deflected point glanced off across the base of Oloana's throat, leaving a jagged thread of crimson. A moment later Hok twisted the weapon from her hand.

"You might have killed yourself," he scolded.

She burst into new tears. "I hate you. As soon as you let me go, I will try again."

Hok took from his shoulders the javelin-strap. Pulling her wrists together, he bound them.

"My feet are free," she cried and springing up darted from the cave and leaped across the fire. Before she had run half a dozen steps he overtook her and dragged her back. This time he bound her ankles with his girdle-thong. She lay helpless but tameless, and glared. Hok hugged his knees and studied her with worried eyes.

"I wanted you the moment I saw you," he said plaintively. "I thought you would want me, too."

She spat at him, rolled over and closed her eyes.

"Sleep then," he conceded. "I shall sleep too."

In the morning he woke to find her propped upon bound hands, her eyes turned unforgivingly upon him.

"Let me untie you," he offered at once.

"Do," she urged bitterly. "Then I can kill myself."

"You must be thirsty," he said. "I will bring some water."

In the clearing he plucked a dried gourd from a spreading vine. Deftly cracking it, he cleansed the withered pulp from one cuplike piece and filled it at the stream. Carrying it back, he offered it to Oloana. She neither moved nor spoke, but when he held it to her lips she drew her head away.

"You do not eat or drink," he said. "You will die."

"Let me die, then."

Hok gazed at her perplexedly. Things were not going as he had hoped. What would life be like, with a sullen, vengeful woman who must go always tied lest she run away or kill herself? Suddenly Hok saw an awful vision—Oloana still and voiceless, with blood flowing from her heart where nested his javelin. So vivid was the mental picture that he dashed the back of his hand to his eyes.

"I hate you." Oloana snapped at him.

He rose and stooped above her. His hands caught the leather that bound her wrists, his muscles suddenly swelled, his breath came in a single explosive pant. The cord broke. Bending, he hooked fingers under the thong at her

ankles. A heave, a tug, and that, too, tore apart.

"Run away," he bade her dully.

She rose to her feet, amazed.

"I thought I had you," he tried to explain, "but even when you were tied, I did not have you." His brow creased at his own paradox. "You hate me. Run away."

"You don't want me now?" she challenged him.

His hands grasped her shoulders. Their faces were close to each other. His stare fastened upon her sulky mouth, as full and red as a summer fruit. How sweet that fruit would taste, he suddenly thought. His face darted down upon hers, their lips crushed together for a whirling moment. Clumsy, savage, unpredicted, it was perhaps the first kiss in human history.

Still more abruptly, Hok spun and fairly raced out of the cave, out of the clearing, into the forest away from Oloana's black eyes and fruit-red mouth.

Chapter V The Capture of Hok

But he did not run far. Somehow it had been easier to run yesterday, even when encumbered by the struggles of Oloana. Hok lagged. His troubled young eyes sought the ground. His feet took him where they wished.

The day and the distances wore away like rock under falling water. Hok did not eat. Twice or thrice he drank at singing brooks, then spewed out the water as thought it were brackish. Once he saw a wild pig rooting in a thicket and by force of habit reached back for his javelins. Then he remembered that he had left them leaning at the door of the cave. He had left Oloana there, too. He could get more javelins, but never another Oloana.

It was nearly evening. He walked slowly down a game-trail, less watchfully than he had ever walked since childhood. Before he knew it, something huge and swarthy flashed from behind a broad tree-bole and flung itself upon him.

On the instant Hok was fighting for his life. One glimpse he caught of that distorted, black-bearded face before they grappled—it was Kimri, the giant who had sworn to follow him and take Oloana back. He was an adversary to daunt the bravest; but Hok had faced Gnorrils, which were more horrible. Smaller but quicker than Kimri he locked his arms around the huge body in a python-tight underhold. He tawny head burrowed with canny force into Kimri's shaggy cascade of black beard, driving under the heavy jaw and forcing it upward and back.

The dark forest man's huge

muscles began to sag as Hok increased the leverage. Hok's heel crooked behind Kimri's. Hok's entire weight came suddenly forward. Down they went with a crash of undergrowth, Kimri beneath, while his lighter opponent's oak-hard fingers drove through the beard-tangles, finding and closing upon the throat beneath.

But a flurry of feet drummed down upon them as they strove on the ground. Two sinewy hands clamped under Hok's chin from above and behind. He bit a finger to the bone, heard his new assailant howl, and next instant was yanked bodily away from the prostrate Kimri. As he tumbled he tore free, whirled catlike to get his feet under his body, and rose swiftly to face a second blackbeard, shorter and older than Kimri. But something darted forward to quiver a thumb's-breadth from his head—a long, lean dagger of chipped flint.

"Move!" the newcomer dared him. It was Zorr, Oloana's chief-tain-father. "Move—and die!"

Hok stood motionless. Kimri struggled up, wheezing and cherishing his bruised throat with shaking fingers. He gulped welcome air into his great lungs, then seized his fallen axe.

"No!" barked the father of Oloana. "The rope!"

At the voice of authority, Kimri dropped his axe and jerked

from his girdle a coil of raw-hide line. Quickly he flung a loop of it over Hok's shoulders and ran the rest of it round and round, pinioning the prisoner's arms to his body.

The chief lowered his dagger. "Where is Oloana?"

Hok shook his head.

"Answer!" roared Kimri, and struck Hok's mouth with his horny palm. Blood sprang to the bruised lips as Hok curled them in scorn.

"Coward's blow," he mocked. "Untie me, and I will take the head from your body like a berry from a bush."

"Where is Oloana?" demanded Zorr again.

"I do not know. I set her free."

"You lie," raged Kimri. "Tell us where you have hidden her."

"I say that she is free," insisted Hok.

"Tell us," Kimri repeated, "or we will kill you."

"You will kill me anyway," said Hok.

Kimri's beard bristled, and again he clutched his axe. As before, the chief intervened.

"It is nearly night, Kimri. We will camp. He can think until morning." He studied Hok narrowly. "Tomorrow, if his mouth is still empty of the words we want, we will stuff it with hot coals."

Kimri grunted acquiescence, and the two herded their prisoner

through the trees for nearly a mile. In a grove at the top of a brush-faced slope they came to a halt, shoved Hok violently down at the base of a big tree and tethered him between two gnarled roots with the free end of the rawhide. Then Zorr kindled a fire with rubbing sticks, chanting a ritual similar to the one Hok's people used. The forest men produced flitches of dried venison from their belt-bags and began to eat, talking in low tones.

Darkness came. The two dark men stretched and yawned. Kimri rose, larger than ever in the fireglow, and came to the big tree. He examined the knots in the cord and gave the prisoner a kick.

"Tomorrow you will talk," he prophesied balefully, and returned to the fire. Zorr built it up with hard wood. Then the two lay down and fell into quick, healthy slumber.

Hok listened until the men by the fire began to breathe regularly and heavily. Then he tried his bonds, cautiously at first, lastly with all his strength; but the rawhide had been passed many times around him, and was drawn tight. He could not make it so much as crack.

Forced to lie still, he thought of Oloana and her resentful beauty, of how he had not tamed her. With the dawn his enemies would

awaken and question him again. Zorr had hinted of fire-torture. He, Hok, could truly tell them nothing, but they would never believe. If he were lucky, he might goad them into finishing him off quickly.

He dozed fitfully at last, but started awake almost immediately. What was that? . . . He felt, rather than heard, the stealthy approach of light feet. The ash-choked fire suddenly cast a bright tongue skyward, and Hok saw the newcomer—a woman, crowned with clouds of night-black hair. Oloana had tracked him down.

She bent to look at Kimri, at her father. Another tongue of flame rose, and by its brief glow she saw where Hok lay. Immediately she tiptoed toward him. Her right hand lifted a javelin—his javelin, brought from the cave.

Kneeling, she slid her other hand across Hok's chest to where his heart beat, beneath two crossed strands of rawhide. He looked up into her deep eyes and grinned mirthlessly. If she but knew how she was cheating her father and her lover, if she could foresee their rage when they would find him slain and beyond torture! The flint point came down. He braced himself to meet it. Then—

The rawhide relaxed its clutch upon him. A strand parted, another and another, before the

keen edge of the javelin-point. He was free. Wondering, he rose to his feet, chafing his cramped wrists and forearms. Oloana, close to him in the dim night, cautioned him to silence with a finger at her full lips. Then she beckoned. Together they stole away toward the edge of the bluff.

Oloana, going first, brushed against leaves that rustled. A roosting bird squawked in sleepy terror and took noisy flight.

Next instant Kimri's awakening roar smote their ears. Oloana ran like a rabbit down the slope, while Hok swung around to meet the clumsy rush of his late captor. A collision, a clasping hug, and again the two who wanted Oloana were straining and heaving in each other's arms. Loose earth gave way beneath their feet. They fell, rolled, and went spinning over and over down the declivity.

At the bottom they struck with a thud, flew sprawling apart, and rose to face each other. The giant hung back from a new encounter, his hand groping for his dagger-hilt. But then he flinched and stiffened. In the gloom Hok fancied that the wrath on the hairy face gave way to blank surprise. A moment later the huge form pitched forward and lay quivering.

Oloana, revealed behind him wrenched the javelin out of his back. She made an apologetic

shrugging gesture with her shoulders.

"I knew that you would win," she stammered, "but I—wanted to help."

From the trees above rang Zorr's shouts for Kimri. Hok extended his hand for the javelin, but Oloana held it out of his reach.

"No," she pleaded. "He is my father. Let us run."

Toward dawn, back at the cave where they had parted, Hok again coaxed fire from rubbing sticks. In its warm light the pair relaxed, their shoulders to the rock.

"Oloana," Hok now found occasion to ask, "why did you follow me? I thought—" He paused.

"Yes," she nodded shyly. "I, too, thought I hated you. But, before you left me, free and alone, you—" she, too, fell silent.

"What was it?"

"This." Her round arms clasped his neck. His lips groped for hers. It was, undoubtedly, the second kiss ever to be achieved.

"Tomorrow we start north," he said, after a time. "My people are there. You will like my brother Zhik, and my sister Eowi." He frowned. "Yet there are things you will not like. The Gnorrls."

"Gnorrls?" she repeated. "Are they animals?"

"No. Not animals."

"Men? Evil men?"

"They are not men, but they

are evil. Like the spirits that trouble sleep."

"I shall not fear them," she said confidently. "You, Hok, will fight and kill them."

"Yes," he agreed, "I will fight and kill them."

Then he paused, wondering how he would manage it.

Chapter VI The Capture of Rivv

Hok and Oloana had not much time in the days that followed to discuss or dread the Gnorrls. As a matter of fact, Hok forgot the creatures, as much as any man could forget, having once encountered them. But when, in sight of the familiar plain and the bluff-bound river he saw on a ridge a cautiously peering hulk that was neither beast nor man, the old hate and revulsion came to him—came almost as strongly as though for the first time.

It was then that Hok, clutching Oloana's wrist with a crushing strength that surprised even her who had seen him grapple the giant Kimri, half growled and half quavered a command never to stand, walk or sleep without a weapon in reach; never to relax guard; never to stir from the home shelter alone. Oloana then knew that if her mate feared anything, it was the unspeakable Gnorrl. Solemnly she promised to obey and strictly she kept that promise.

Approaching the old rock-defended camp by the river, Hok's trained eye glimpsed footprints that told him of the presence of his kind. When he and Oloana drew into sight at the narrow entrance between rock and water, young Unn, who was standing guard, first sprang erect with poised javelin, then burst into an uproar of welcome. Others dashed into view—Eowi, Barp and Nohda, all larger and lovelier to Hok's sight than when he had left them. There was a gay reunion in the open space before the cave; Hok introduced Oloana, with the simple declaration that she belonged to him and must be respected as much as his own right eye. Eowi smiled shyly but winningly at the strange girl, and cemented a new friendship with a present—the finest of the scrapers captured from the Gnorrls.

When the first hugs and shouts had subsided a trifle, Hok suddenly stiffened to attention. Two figures—living human figures—crouched in the shadow of the rock.

"Who are these?" he demanded at once.

"Oh," replied Eowi, with the carelessness employed in speaking of chattels. "Zhik found them."

"Zhik?" Hok had missed his brother. "Where did he find them?"

"Here he comes," interjected

Barp. "Let him tell it himself."

Zhik trotted into view, bearing the hide and choicest parts of a slaughtered goat. He whooped at sight of Hok, and the two exchanged affectionate fraternal roars and buffets. Then came once more an introduction of Oloana, and finally Zhik's explanation of the strangers.

He called them to stand forth—a middle-aged man with a great slate-colored beard, and a slim young girl, several years Eowi's junior and as dark in complexion as Oloana. The man's name was Kaga, and the girl was his daughter, Dwil. Zhik considered them his property, by right of discovery, capture and defense against the Gnorrls.

"Two days after you left," he told Hok, "I was hunting, and saw four people—these two, another man and an older woman. I did not know if they were friends, and I kept out of sight. They were new in the country, for they did not watch for Gnorrls. Before they knew it, Gnorrls had risen out of the grass and bushes—nine." He held up that many fingers to illustrate.

He went on to say that the second man, foremost of the quartet of strangers, had been seized and literally plucked to pieces by three Gnorrls—his arms and legs had come away in those terrible paws, like flower-petals. The others ran. The oldest wo-

man had gone next, being overtaken by two of the pursuing monsters, and had died under their rain of blows. Before the last two could win to safety, a stone hurled from a Gnorrl's cleft wand knocked the gray-bearded man down. His daughter had rallied beside him, facing hopeless odds. She meant, it seemed, to die in his defense.

"But the Gnorrls did not know I watched," continued Zhik, a trifle complacent in memory of his scouting skill. "I jumped up, and let them have both javelins, one after another. I wounded two. A rock came my way, but it went to pieces in the air, and it only cut me." He laid a finger on his temple. A scar showed, that had not been there when Hok had left. "After that the girl—Dwil—threw her javelin, and it went through a Gnorrl's arm. That was three down in less time than I have told it; the others ran before they were well aware of what had happened, and carried away their wounded and the two they had killed."

He told how he had gone up to the fallen man and the girl. She had been most suspicious, and drew a stone knife, which Zhik took away from her. Then, as her father regained consciousness, Zhik possessed himself of their other weapons and obliged them to return with him to the cave. There they had been as-

signed most of the community chores—wood-carrying, water-fetching and so on.

Hok talked to Kaga, whose language like Oloana's was understandable. He learned that the unlucky four had been searching, as had Hok's own people a year ago, for new and uncrowded hunting grounds. They had friends, far to the south and east, who waited for them to return and report.

"You have friends?" Hok repeated. "You will stay here." For he knew that the Gnorrls would be quite enough to fight at one time; he wanted no human adversaries in the neighborhood.

"Yes, you will stay here," seconded Zhik. Then he looked at Hok, at the manifestly happy Oloana, and finally at Dwil, who lowered her eyes. Zhik muttered to his brother: "I want to ask you something."

"Wait," said Hok, with all the authority he could muster. His own courtship of Oloana had been so brief as to be almost instantaneous, and he had by no means repented at leisure; yet he wanted to be sure before advising, Zhik, or permitting him to mate with this captive girl.

"You are growing a beard since you got Oloana," Zhik added. "It looks well."

"Wait," said Hok again, and his brother sighed dolefully.

Hok asked to hear more about

the Gnorrls, and learned that they were more numerous by far than a year ago. Not a day passed but what Gnorrls were sighted, sneaking through thickets or among boulders, watching all that their human foes did, but seldom offering fight. Zhik did not like this, nor, when he heard of it, did Hok.

"They are planning something," said the older brother. "They care for their dead—that means that they worship, as we do. If they worship, they think. And they are many, where we are few."

It was early in the summer that Barp and Unn, rambling together in search of marmots, came back in a scamper to gasp out what they had seen—a group of Gnorrls overpowering a human stranger. He, a slim youth whose budding beard was dark, was patently unused to Gnorrls. They had stalked and surrounded him almost effortlessly. But the novelty of the tale was the forbearance of the captors. Instead of tearing their prey to pieces, they had bound him with long strips of tough bark and dragged him away northward. Hok frowned and pondered. Then he asked Barp and Unn if this was not a joking untruth.

Both lads protested earnestly, and offered proof of their adventure. Unn, stealing in the wake of the Gnorrls and their prize,

had picked up something that might have been torn from a man's belt during the brief struggle—a pouch made of striped cat-skin. Hok took the article, opened it and made an inventory. There was a hank of split-sinew thread, three or four flint flakes, a bone awl ground to a slender point, with a spiral line incised around it. At sight of this last item, Oloana cried out sharply and ran to clutch at the splinter of bone.

"My brother!" she exclaimed.

"What?" grunted Hok. "What about your brother?" Zhik and Eowi both came near to listen.

"It is his," replied Oloana. "I made the awl for him. The man the Gnorrls took is my brother—Rivv, the son of Zorr."

Hok pursed his lips. "He must have followed us here. He should have kept his eyes open."

"The Gnorrls did not kill him," said Barp again. "I wonder what they will do with him."

Oloana was looking only at Hok. "Go," she said suddenly. "Follow him."

"Huh?" ejaculated her husband. "Follow your brother?"

"See if you can get him away from the Gnorrls."

That began a discussion that did not end with supper or with bedtime. Hok pointed out that Rivv had come north to avenge himself on Oloana's abductor—which meant Hok: Oloana answered that Rivv meant only to

help her. Hok argued that the Gnorrls probably had killed Rivv; Oloana made reply that, had they intended to do so, they would not have bound him and carried him away. Hok complained that Rivv was of a strange and enemy people, and Oloana flashed back with considerable heat that she herself was of that same race.

The night long there was little sleep for anyone within earshot of the two, and in the morning the debate came to a conclusion that feminists might regard as epoch-making—the woman had her way. Hok made over temporary command to Zhik, took his weapons and a few slices of dried meat, and left camp to follow the brother of Oloana.

Chapter VII

Rescue from the Gnorrls

He picked up the trail where Barp and Unn had said he would. It was easy to trace, and as he went northward he saw, in one or two spots, the clear-made tracks of the Gnorrls. Among them were distinctive narrow prints of a true man's foot.

Thus guided, he crossed a little range of hills and came late in the afternoon to a place where a year ago he had mentally set up the boundary of his hunting grounds. A sloping height rose beside the river that poured down from the north, and to the west were trees.

Between the rising ground and the river at the east was a very narrow strip of sandy beach that had once been part of the river bottom. At the southern end of this strip lay a long jumble of boulders, washed there in ages past by a greater river, now choked with sand and coarse weeds.

The Gnorrls had taken this low, narrow way and he followed them, observing as he did so that the water had once risen here to considerable height, but that it had fallen and now ran swiftly in its narrow channel, almost in rapids. Emerging from the pass, he saw that the northern face of the rise fell nearly perpendicularly, and then beyond a small meadow began semi-wooded country, with thickets and clumps of trees and brush.

At that time Hok may have been close upon the heels of the Gnorrl band, which would be hampered by its prisoner, but he went no farther into strange country, camping before sundown on the sand at the northern end of the tunnel between river and height. The next morning he resumed his hunt, but moved slowly and with a caution that may have been greater than was necessary. Thus, he did not approach bushes, groves or other possible hiding places of Gnorrls without an examination from all sides. His second night out from home he

spent without a fire, climbing a tree for safety from possible wolves or cave-lions. The following day he spent in a treacherous and foggy swamp, and barely emerged before it was nightfall again. This time he camped in a sort of burrow made by the uprooting of a great tree, and in that shelter he dared build a fire.

Dawn almost brought disaster, for it was a fearsome scream that brought him instantly erect, awake and alert as the wild instantly are, to face the leap of a tawny, spotted sabertooth.

He had no time to more than seize his javelin, drop to one knee, and present its point to the charging monster.

Braced against the ground behind him, it impaled the great cat from breast to spine.

Scrambling from beneath its great weight, he wrenched his spear from the carcass and then stared down in awe. Fearsome things in this Gnorrl country.

At noon of his fourth day he moved cautiously over an open plain, sparsely covered with grass and heather, and bearing scant sign of game. It was a poor country up ahead, he guessed, and he could not blame the Gnorrls for wanting back the pleasant territory he and his were now holding.

The lips of a valley lay northward, apparently formed by a

curve of the river on a lower reach of which his people camped. Toward this depression led the tracks of the Gnorrls he followed—they must be within it. At once he dropped down and began an elaborate creeping approach, flattening his long body in the heather. After a time he saw a Gnorrl, then several more, emerge from the valley and strike off westward, as if hunting. He waited for them to get well away, then resumed his lizardlike advance.

The sun dropped down the sky, and down, as Hok drew nearer to the valley. He paused at last—he heard a noise, or noises. That was the kind of noise made by many throats and tongues; more Gnorrls must be in the valley. At length he won to the brink gingerly parted a tussock of flowered stalks, and gazed down a rocky incline upon the floor of the valley.

It was full of Gnorrls.

The steeps that made up this slope of the valley fringed a great rounded level space, a sort of vast enlargement of the guarded camp ground which Hok's own people had taken from the Gnorrls. In ancient times the river had been higher and wider up here, too; this had been a bay or even a lake. Now a big dry flat was visible, and this unlovely people gathered upon it, to make fires and rubbish-heaps and stenches.

The Gnorrls sat, singly or in

family knots, around small, ill-made hearths. Some of them toasted bits of meat on skewers of green wood, some chipped and knocked at half-finished flints, women chewed the fleshy surfaces of hides to soften and smooth them. Little Gnorrls, naked and monkeyish, romped and scuffled together, shrilling incessantly. Some of the old males grumbled to each other in the incomprehensible language of the race, pausing now and then to wag their unshapely heads as though in sage agreement. Over all went up an odor, so strong as to be almost palpable, of uncleanness and decay and near-bestiality—an odor that had something in it of reptile, of ape, of musky wolf, as well as something like none of these.

Hok tried to judge how many there were. Like most intelligent savages, he could count up to a hundred—ten tens of his fingers—but beyond that was too difficult. There were more than ten tens of Gnorrls, many more, with something of a pioneering spirit in mathematics, Hok wondered if there could not be a full ten of ten-tens; but there was not time to count or add or compute, even if he could marshal the figures in his head.

Thus he estimated the situation, as a good hunter and warrior should, half instinctively and almost at first sweeping glance.

His second glance showed him the specified item he had come to note and to act upon.

Close to the foot of the declivity, but well to the left of where Hok was peeping down, stood a little gathering of Gnorrls, all full-grown males, and in their center a tall figure. This one had a smooth dusky skin, a lean body, an upright head with a black young beard—Rivv, no other. He stood free, though Hok thought he could make out weals upon chest and arm that bespoke recently-loosened cords. One big Gnorrl held Rivv by the wrist. Another held out something to him.

Hok stared, absolutely dumbfounded. By all mysteries of all gods and spirits, known and unknown, the Gnorrl was trying to make Rivv take a javelin! Why? Hok almost thrust himself into view, in his amazed eagerness to see more. Then it came to him.

The Gnorrls had puzzled it out. Man, fewer and weaker than they, had one priceless advantage, the javelin and the art of casting it. That was why Rivv had been seized and kept alive. The Gnorrls meant to learn javelin-throwing. Rivv was to teach them.

To Hok's distant ears came the voice of Rivv, loud even as it choked with rage: "No! No!" And the Gnorrls understood his manner, if not his words. Their own insistent snarls and roars beat

like surf around the captive, and the Gnorrl who offered the javelin thrust it into Rivv's free hand and closed his fingers forcibly upon it.

Far away as he was, Hok could see the glitter of Rivv's wide, angry eye. For a moment the prisoner stood perfectly still, tense, in the midst of that clamoring, gesticulating ring of monsters. Then, swift as a flying bird, his javelin hand rose and darted. The Gnorrl who held Rivv's wrist crumpled with the javelin in his breast.

For one moment the other Gnorrls stood silent and aghast, their snarls forzeon on their gross lips. In that moment a loud yell rang from on high. Hok sprang erect on the bluff, waving his javelin.

"Rivv!" he trumpeted. "Rivv, brother of Oloana! Run! Climb here!"

As if jerked into motion, Rivv ran. So, a breath later, did the entire squatting-place. Rivv dodged through his ring of captors and headed for the height.

"Climb!" yelled Hok again, at the top of his lungs. Rivv climbed.

He was active, but the rock was steep. He had barely mounted six times his own height when the first of the pursuing Gnorrls had reached the foot of the ascent. Stones and sticks of wood rained about Rivv, but by some unbelievable fortune none of them hit.

He gained a great open crack in the face of the bluff, and swarmed up more swiftly. The Gnorrls were after him scrambling like monkeys for all their bulk. But Hok, falling at full length above, reached down a great hand, caught Rivv's shoulder and dragged him up by sheer strength.

"Who are you?" panted Rivv, staring at his rescuer.

Instead of answering, Hok carefully kicked a great mass of stone and gravel down upon the climbing Gnorrls. To the accompaniment of fearsome howls, both men turned and ran.

It was a splendid dash on deer-swift feet given the further impetus of danger behind. Nor did it cease until, long after dark, Hok and Rivv came to the edge of the swamp and there made a fire. They talked long, and before they slept they touched hands, shyly but honestly, in friendship.

Chapter VIII Alliance

The midsummer dusk was thickening, and the half-moon of open space in front of Hok's cave was filled—with skin tents along the curve of rock, with cooking fires, and with men and women and children. Most of them were strangers, quiet but suspicious, dark of hair and sal-low of skin in contract to the

tawniness and ruddiness of Hok's brothers and sisters.

At a central place, small so that men might draw close, sat three grave figures. Hok, the host, was youngest and largest and most at ease. Opposite him, his long fingers smoothing his beard was stationed Zorr, Olo-ana's father, who had last viewed Hok as his prisoner. The third man was the heavy, grizzled Nukl, head of the clan from which Kaga and Dwil had come.

"This meeting is a strange thing," said Zorr weightily. "It has never happened before that peoples who hate each other have met and eaten food and talked together."

"Yet it must be," rejoined Hok, very slow and definite in his defense of the new idea. "I sent your son, Rivv, back to you with the word to come. He and I are friends. He vouches for you. This is good hunting ground, as you yourself have seen."

"I think the meeting is good," chimed in Nukl. "Kaga and Dwil came from you to say that you were a true man, Hok. They said that there would be country and game enough for all of us."

"Why do you do this?" Zorr demanded. "It is not usual that a hunter gives away part of his good country for nothing."

"There are the Gnorrls to fight," said Hok.

Every ear within sound of his

voice pricked up. Men, women and children paused at eating or chattering, to listen.

"I have told you about the Gnorrls, and of how Rivv and I saw that they intended to return and eat us up," went on Hok. "My people have killed many, but there are more Gnorrls than we have javelins. You, Zorr, bring four men with you, and Nukl has five, counting Kaga. My three brothers, whom I sent north to spy on the Gnorrls, and I myself make four. With the women and boys who can throw spears, we number three tens. That is enough to fight and beat the Gnorrls."

He felt less sure than he sounded, and perhaps Zorr guessed this. The southern chief pointed out that his own people came from the south, where Gnorrls were not a danger.

"But too many hunters live there," argued Nulk on Hok's side. The game is scarce. You, Zorr, know that. Once or twice your young men and mine have fought over wounded deer."

"There will be no reason to fight for food here," added Hok. "Men need not kill each other. If anyone wants to fight, there will be Gnorrls."

"The Gnorrls never troubled us," reiterated Zorr.

"But if they come and eat my people up, will they stop here?" asked Hok. "They have learned

that man's flesh is good, and they may come into your forests, looking for more."

Nulk sighed. "I think that I will have to stay. Zhik, the young man who is scouting up north, is going to take Dwil, the daughter of my brother Kaga. Kaga wants to stay, and I should help him if he is in danger." His eyes shone in the fire light. "Anyway, the Gnorrls have killed two of my people. I want some of their blood for that."

"That makes the southern forest less crowded," pointed out Zorr. "Plenty of room and game for my people."

But Hok had gained inspiration from what Nukl had said. "Zorr," he replied, "your son, Rivv, has asked for my sister, Eowi. She wants him to have her. I shall give her to him—if he remains with me."

Zorr stiffened, almost rose. He muttered something like a dismayed curse. Hok continued serenely:

"Two of your children will be here when the Gnorrls come. Also, if Oloana is spared, there may be a son, a child of your child—"

"I shall help you against the Gnorrls," interrupted Zorr, savage but honest in his capitulation. "When does the fighting begin?"

"When Zhik warns us," replied Hok gravely. "It may be many days yet."

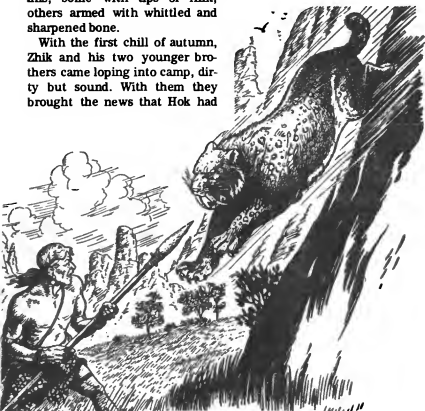
And the remainder of the summer went in peace. Hok and his new allies hunted successfully and ate well. Once a lone Gnorrl ventured close, to be speared and exhibited to the strangers as an example of what they must face sooner or later. The greatest item of preparation was the fashioning, by every person in the three parties of new javelins—sheafs and faggots of javelins, some with tips of flint, others armed with whittled and sharpened bone.

With the first chill of autumn, Zhik and his two younger brothers came loping into camp, dirty but sound. With them they brought the news that Hok had

long awaited with mixed attitudes of anxiety and determination.

The Gnorrls were on the march. Up north in their country a blizzard had come, and it had nipped the brutal race into action. They were advancing slowly but steadily into their old haunts in the south.

"We are ready to meet them here," said Zorr at once, but Hok had another idea.



"No, not here. A day's march toward them is the best place."

Quickly he gave orders. Only the children remained at the camp before the cave. Barp and Unn were ordered to take charge there, but teased and begged until at the last moment Hok included them in the expeditionary force that numbered full thirty men, women and boys. In the morning the set out northward.

Hok, pausing at a certain dam-like heap of stones, lifted his palm to signal a halt. Then he gazed as if for the first time at the rocky slope beyond the narrow level between it and the swift waters.

"We shall fight the Gnorrls here," he said definitely, and almost added that he was sure of winning.

Zorr and Nukl moved forward from their own groups, coming up at Hok's elbows, they, too, studied the ground that Hok was choosing for battle. "How shall we fight them if there are so many?" Nukl asked.

Hok pointed at the slope. "That leads to the top of a bluff," he said. "The Gnorrls will come from the north side, and will not climb, but will enter the pass between it and the river. They can come upon us only a few at a time, and we will have these rocks for a protection."

"How do you know that they will choose the pass?" was Zorr's

question. "They may go to the west, and through those trees."

Hok shook his head. "Before they come, we will set the trees afire—the sap is almost out of them. And the Gnorrls will go east, into the pass."

Zorr and Nukl glanced at each other, and nodded. Then Zorr addressed Hok again: "It sounds like a good plan, better than any other. What shall we do?"

"Zhik says that there are more than ten tens of Gnorrls. A few of us shall meet them on the plain beyond here, and make them angry. Then those few will run and draw them into the pass. After that it will be as I say."

He gestured toward the crown of the slope. "You, Zorr, shall be the leader there, with most of the men, to throw javelins upon the Gnorrls when they are close together and rushing into the narrow pass."

"But you?" prompted Zorr.

"I shall go, with my three brothers, to meet the Gnorrls."

"Me, too," said Rivv, who had come forward and overheard part of the discussion. "I can run almost as fast as you."

"Very well," granted Hok over his shoulder. "You, too, Rivv. Now we must camp. First we will get ready, as far as possible. Are the women here with the extra javelins?"

"They are," Nukl answered him.

"Then I want some—as many as ten—laid midway between here and the far end of the pass." He turned around. "Oloana!" he called. "Bring the javelins that you have."

She came obediently, and they went together to lay the weapons at the point he had chosen. For a moment he studied them, then on inspiration picked them up and thrust their heads into the earth, the shafts pointing almost straight upward. "They will be easier to the hand," he commented.

"Why do you do that?" asked Oloana.

"You will find out," said her mate, rather darkly. Again he raised his voice. "Zhik, are you back there? You and Dwil take more javelins to the north end of the pass, and stick them there as I do here."

Zhik shouted comprehension of the order, and shortly afterward went trotting by with Dwil. When the two rows of spears had been set in place, all four young people returned to the barrier of stones. It was nearly evening. Hok, Zorr, and Nukl, as chiefs of their respective bands, kindled fires with appropriate ceremonies. Then there was cooking and discussion. Hok repeated his defense plan for all to hear.

"The women will stay back of these stones," he concluded, except those who go, before battle,

to set fire to the trees. I do not want anybody to run, unless the Gnorrls get the upper hand. Then those who are able must try to get back to the cave. The Gnorrls will have a hard time capturing that."

All nodded understanding, and both Zorr and Nukl spoke briefly to their own parties, in support of Hok's arrangement.

"When will the Gnorrls be here?" Hok then asked his brothers, for the benefit of all listeners.

"Tomorrow," replied Zhik. "Probably before the sun is high."

"Good," said Hok. "We must be awake by dawn, and take our places for the fight. Tonight we shall sleep, and be strong and fresh."

But as the camp settled to repose, he could not sleep. Neither Oloana nor Zhik could induce him to lie down. For hours after all had dozed away, he sat in the brisk chill of the night, on a large stone of the barrier. Now and then he weighed his axe in hand, or picked up a javelin and felt its shaft for possible flaws. When he did close his eyes, he slept sitting up. Four or five times he started awake, trembling from dreams that the enemy was upon him.

Chapter IX Conquest

The Gnorrls were up betimes

the next morning, stretching, grumbling, fighting for drinking room at the creekside. A light frost patched the ground, and necessitated building up of the fires that had burned low overnight. There was considerable bad feeling here and there, because some who had brought abundant food would not share with those who had little or none; but three or four of the largest and oldest sternly curbed all debate, even striking with clubs those who persisted. At length the advance began.

The formation was simple, but it must have been arranged and commanded by the wisest of those dark psyches the workings of which no human being can understand or even imagine. The fighting males of the horde went first, in a single line, close-drawn and several deep. In front walked the chiefs—perhaps their chieftainship was one of tradition or election, perhaps physical superiority, perhaps chance. All bore weapons—clubs, stones, or cleft sticks with pebbles in place for casting. Some carried the rough spears they had made in imitation of the javelins that had wrought such havoc among the Gnorrl-people.

Behind this wave of armed males came the females and the young, in a completely disorganized mass. Possibly they were held in that position as a supporting

body in case of defeat, more probably they attended simply as curious watchers of the triumph that seemed already achieved. Sometimes the half-grown cubs of this rearward body would scamper forward as if to join the fighting males, but they were always driven back with warning yells and sometimes with missiles.

That the Gnorrls were able to communicate, to think ahead, and to obey their leaders can be demonstrated by the fact that they maintained their formation and their forward advance while the sun mounted higher and higher toward the top of the sky.

The morning was considerably beyond its halfway point when, pushing through a belt of scrubby willow that marked the dry bed of an old creek, the foremost of the Gnorrls came out upon a plain with the river to the left and a bluff beyond.

First of all they saw a great cloud of murky vapor above the trees that grew to the right of the bluff—smoke. Tongues of flame flickered among the branches. The Gnorrls faltered in their advance. Through that woods they had intended to go, and to kill men, their foes and persecutors on the rolling meadows beyond. Now they must go far to the west and so avoid the fire, or negotiate the narrow pass between bluff and river.

Even as their strange minds

comprehended the new factor in the campaign, and before they could grapple with it for answer, a loud and mocking whoop sprang up from the quiet ground before them. A tall, tawny man in leopard skin rose into view from behind a bunch of dried thistles, so close to their ranks that several Gnorrls marked and recognized his features—it was Hok, their foremost tormentor. A moment later an answering yell, from several throats at once, echoed from a point due east. Almost at the river bank four more young men popped up from a little hollow in the earth.

The Gnorrls blared their own challenge, a fearful blast of rage and meance. Before it swelled, Hok had cast one, then the other of his javelins. The second was in the air before the first had struck down a leader of the Gnorrls, and it flew beyond its fellow to pierce the heavy paunch of a warrior in the ranks. Then Hok yelled again, in derision and invitation, and began to run—not back toward the burning trees or the face of the bluff, but almost parallel with the front of the Gnorrl array.

As he did so, his companions by the river threw their javelins, four in a volley and then four more. At that close range, barely forty paces, there was little chance of missing. Every javelin of the eight took effect, and four or per-

haps five of the stricken Gnorrls died on the spot or within moments. An earth-shaking howl of execration went up from the army of brute-men, and the whole left wing of it charged full at the four audacious javelin casters, who turned, laughing, and fled. The right wing had crumpled upon itself to follow and overtake Hok, who still raced along the front of the line. A rain of ill-aimed missiles fell almost upon him, but the range, though short for a javelin in good hands, was too great for accuracy with stones or clubs. As the Gnorrls lumbered with deadly intent upon him, came almost within reach, Hok swerved to his right and made for the pass.

For him, at least, it was a chase that taxed him to the utmost. Zhik, Rivv and the two younger lads ran easily away from their pursuers, but Hok, who had fled at an angle to draw the right-hand portion of the massed Gnorrls after him, had a near thing of it. So close did the swiftest Gnorrls win to him that they stretched out huge, eager hands in readiness to clutch him. But at that point he, too, turned into the straight line toward the pass and ran in earnest, four flying strides to three of the best Gnorrl.

Zhik and Rivv had reached the point where the bluff rose, and a moment later Barp and Unn caught up. There, at the head of

the narrow lane between rock and water, they came to an abrupt stop, and the Gnorrls as they ran heavily thought that these amazing adversaries were calmly plucking reeds or saplings that grew there in a clump. But the reeds were javelins, and Hok stopped as he ran, to let them hiss over his back. Two of his closest pursuers fell in mid-leap, somersaulting and writhing. That gave him a moment to run slower, whirl around, shout new insults and make again a gesture of invitation to the conflict. Three more of those nearest him collapsed before javelins thrown by the men at the head of the pass. Then Hok had joined his companions, and they were dashing along beyond the bluff.

That the Gnorrls were not cowardly was plain from their headlong and unfaltering charge against the shrewd javelin-volleyers that had found more than a dozen targets; but they could be cautious as well. The moment the leaders reached the head of the pass, they stopped, as any sagacious wild thing should. Their instinct demanded that they investigate before plunging blindly in.

As they peered down the narrow strip of beach, on which the flying backs of Hok and the others shrank and shrank with increasing distance, more Gnorrls caught up, paused and peered,

too. Then the rest arrived, in a swarm that closed in upon itself, pushing, cramping, chattering, eager to know what went on ahead.

Upon that clot of life, that gattered while the leaders studied the situation during a dozen breaths' spaces, fell destruction. From the crown of the bluff overhead came javelins and more javelins, and the yells of triumphant marksmen who take pride in seeing their casts fly home. Zorr, Nukl and nine others were hurling shafts as swiftly as they could seize them from the great scattered store at their feet.

The fire took effect in the midst of the packed throng, and for a moment or so the Gnorrls in that central position were all that experienced and comprehended what was happening. They did considerable screaming and milling before the outer edge of the pack, which could move in defense and retaliation, understood and peeled away and dashed with a fine show of courage at the foot of the bluff.

The Gnorrls could climb, even where human hands and feet might fail at the steep ascent; but it was foolish and vain to advance against the defenders above. Laughing boisterously in their security, Zorr's and Nukl's men centered their attention upon this scaling party. Not a javelin

went wrong, and only one Gnorrl reached the brink of the level space above. Him they allowed to mount up and up, after the others had been picked off or had retreated. Mouthing his inarticulate war-cry, he scrambled pluckily up among them; and every man of the eleven stabbed home in his hairy body.

In the meantime, Hok and his four companions had come to a halt once again, midway down the pass. Their saucy yells and capers stung the pursuers into motion as before. There was a great struggle to rush down the narrow way, so much of an effort to be first that half a dozen or more of the Gnorrls were thrust by their fellows into the rapid water, where they were whipped howling away and under, helpless to fight to shore. Meanwhile, the fugitives waited only until the rush was well under way before snatching more javelins from where they seemingly sprouted and sending them singing into the face of the attack. So narrow was the front, so close together the Gnorrls, that half a dozen casts raised a veritable heap of bodies, damming for a moment the onset of the others. And yet again the decoy party, not one of whom had suffered as much as a scratch, turned and fled, distancing all pursuit.

The Gnorrls stubbornly followed, while javelins from in front

and from the height above claimed lives and lives. A new blizzard of flint points seemed to pour from a heaped barrier or rocks. To this they charged panting, and now their enemies did not run. They thrust and hacked from behind their defense, and more poured down from the slope, striking from the flank. Women at the rear screamed encouragement and threw javelins. When the supply was gone, they threw firebrands and rocks.

One who fights thus hand to hand remembers little about it afterward, nor cares to. He is only glad when it is over. It does not make much difference even to realize that he has won.

Hok would not hold his head still as Oloana tried to lay a broad green leaf upon the gash that showed the bare white bone of his chin-point.

"How many are killed?" he asked once more.

"Zorr, my father, is only stunned," she replied. "For a time we thought that Rivv would be our chief."

"I am your chief," Hok reminded her. "Nukl is dead?"

"Yes, and Kaga. Perhaps Zhik will lead that party after this."

"I think that Zhik will limp always," Hok's voice was low, but Zhik, sprawling nearby, overheard.

"I shall not limp always," he shouted defiantly. Then he shut

his mouth and gritted his teeth as Dwil dragged strongly upon his ankle. She, too, turned a protesting face toward Hok.

"The leg bone is broken," she conceded, "but I will put sticks on each side, and hold the break shut with clay. My people know how to cure lameness of this sort. He will walk before winter is over."

"Kaga is dead," said Oloana again, "and I think three more of those who were on the high ground. They charged and killed many Gnorrls, but the Gnorrls were able to get at them. They had no barrier of stones." She smoothed down the leaf. Hok's blood was thickening under it and would hold it in place.

Barp, spitting blood from broken teeth, was returning from a survey of the pass.

"How many are dead?" asked Hok.

"I do not know. Very many. Far north I could hear the others crying like rabbits in the snare."

"I am glad that some were left alive," said Hok suddenly. "They will always be afraid to come back here, and will tell other Gnorrls, and the young ones who are born after them, of how terrible we are."

Barp did not share this approval of the situation. "I want to fight Gnorrls again some time," he said, rather wistfully.

Hok put out his hand to cuff affectionately the lad's untidy head. "Wait," he counseled, "You have many years. There is enough game country for all of us who are left alive, but more men will come. When this country is crowded, you and others can go north and capture new ground from the Gnorrls."

"And when the Gnorrls are all killed?"

"That will take a very long time," said Hok, "but when the Gnorrls are all killed, men will own everything."

The End

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THE

DRAW

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A Jerome Bixby special—a choice blend of science fiction and the classic tale of the West—in which a young punk suddenly becomes the fastest gun alive—and he doesn't have to reach to prove it!

JOE DOOLIN's my name. Cowhand — work for old Farrel over at Lazy F beyond the Pass. Never had much of anything exciting happen to me — just punched cows and lit up on payday — until the day I happened to ride through the Pass on my way to town and saw young Buck Tarrant's draw.

Now, Buck'd always been a damn good shot. Once he got his gun in his hand he could put a bullet right where he wanted it up to twenty paces, and within an inch of his aim up to a hundred feet. But Lord God, he couldn't draw to save his life — I'd seen him a couple of times before in the Pass, trying to. He'd face a tree and go into a crouch, and I'd know he was pretending the tree was Billy

the Kid or somebody, and then he'd slap leather — and his clumsy hand would wallop his gunbutt, he'd yank like hell, his old Peacemaker would come staggering out of his holster like a bear in heat, and finally he'd line on his target and plug it dead center. But the whole business took about a second and a half, and by the time he'd ever finished his fumbling in a real fight, Billy the Kid or Sheriff Ben Randolph over in town or even me, Joe Doolin, could have cut him in half.

So this time, when I was riding along through the Pass, I saw Buck upslope from me under the trees, and I just grinned and didn't pay too much attention.

He stood facing an old elm tree, and I could see he'd tacked a playing card about four feet

up the trunk, about where a man's heart would be.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him go into his gunman's crouch. He was about sixty feet away from me, and, like I said, I wasn't paying much mind to him.

I heard the shot, flat down the rocky slope that separated us. I grinned again, picturing that fumbly draw of his, the wild slap at leather, the gun coming out drunklike, maybe even him dropping it — I'd seen him do that once or twice.

It got me to thinking about him, as I rode closer.

He was a bad one. Nobody said any different than that. Just bad. He was a bony runt of about eighteen, with bulging eyes and a wide mouth that was always turned down at the corners. He got his nickname Buck because he had buck teeth, not because he was heap man. He was some handy with his fists, and he liked to pick ruckuses with kids he was sure he could lick. But the tipoff on Buck is that he'd blat like a two-day calf to get out of mixing with somebody he was scared of — which meant somebody his own size or bigger. He'd jaw his way out of it, or just turn and slink away with his tail along his belly. His dad had died a couple years before, and he lived with his ma on a small

ranch out near the Pass. The place was falling to pieces, because Buck wouldn't lift a hand to do any work around — his ma just couldn't handle him at all. Fences were down, and the yard was all weedgrown, and the house needed some repairs — but all Buck ever did was hang around town, trying to rub up against some of the tough customers who drank in the Once Again Saloon, or else he'd ride up and lie around under the trees along the top of the Pass and just think — or, like he was today, he'd practise drawing and throwing down on trees and rocks.

Guess he always wanted to be tough. Really tough. He tried to walk with tough men, and, as we found out later, just about all he ever thought about while he was lying around was how he could be tougher than the next two guys. Maybe you've known characters like that — for some damfool reason they just got to be able to whup anybody who comes along, and they feel low and mean when they can't, as if the size of a man's fist was the size of the man.

So that's Buck Tarrant — a halfsized, poisonous, no-good kid who wanted to be a hardcase.

But he'd never be, not in a million years. That's what made it funny — and kind of pitiful too. There wasn't no real strength in him, only a scared hate. It



takes guts as well as speed to be tough with a gun, and Buck was just a nasty little rat of a kid who'd probably always counter-punch his way through life when he punched at all. He'd kite for cover if you lifted a lip.

I heard another shot, and looked up the slope. I was near enough now to see that the card he was shooting at was a ten of diamonds — and that he was plugging the pips one by one. Always could shoot, like I said.

Then he heard me coming, and whirled away from the tree, his gun holstered, his hand held out in front of him like he must have imagined Hickock or somebody held it when he was ready to draw.

I stopped my horse about ten feet away and just stared at him. He looked real funny in his baggy old levis and dirty checkered shirt and that big gun low on his hip, and me knowing he couldn't handle it worth a damn.

"Who you trying to scare, Buck?" I said. I looked him up and down and snickered. "You look about as dangerous as a sheepherder's wife."

"And you're a son of a bitch," he said.

I stiffened and shoved out my jaw. "Watch that, runt, or I'll get off and put my foot in your mouth and pull you on like a boot!"

"Will you now," he said nastily, "you son of a bitch?"

And he drew on me . . . and I goddam near fell backwards off my saddle!

I swear, I hadn't even seen his hand move, he'd drawn so fast! That gun just practically *appeared* in his hand!

"Will you now?" he said again, and the bore of his gun looked like a greased gate to hell.

I sat in my saddle scared spitless, wondering if this was when I was going to die. I moved my hands out away from my body, and tried to look friendlylike — actually, I'd never tangled with Buck, just razzed him a little now and then like everybody did; and I couldn't see much reason why he'd want to kill me.

But the expression on his face was full of gloating, full of wildness, full of damn-you recklessness — exactly the expression you'd look to find on a kid like Buck who suddenly found out he was the deadliest gunman alive.

And that's just what he was, believe me.

Once I saw Bat Masterson draw — and he was right up there with the very best. Could draw and shoot accurately in maybe half a second or so — you could hardly see his hand move; you just heard the slap of hand on gunbutt, and a split-second later the shot. It takes a lot of practise to be able to get a gun

out and on target in that space of time, and that's what makes gunmen. Practise, and a knack to begin with. And, I guess, the yen to be a gunman, like Buck Tarrant'd always had.

When I saw Masterson draw against Jeff Steward in Abilene, it was that way — slap, crash, and Steward was three-eyed. Just a blur of motion.

But when Buck Tarrant drew on me, right now in the Pass, I didn't see any motion *atall*. He just crouched, and then his gun was on me. Must have done it in a millionth of a second, if a second has millionths.

It was the fastest draw I'd ever seen. It was, I reckoned, the fastest draw anybody's ever seen. It was an impossibly fast draw — a man's hand just couldn't move to his holster that fast, and grab and drag a heavy Peacemaker up in a two foot arc that fast.

It was plain damn impossible — but there it was.

And there I was.

I didn't say a word. I just sat and thought about things, and my horse wandered a little farther up the slope and then stopped to chomp grass. All the time, Buck Tarrant was standing there, poised, that wild gloating look in his eyes, knowing he could kill me anytime and knowing I knew it.

When he spoke, his voice was

shaky — it sounded like he wanted to bust out laughing, and not a nice laugh either.

"Nothing to say, Doolin?" he said. "Pretty fast, huh?"

I said, "Yeah, Buck. Pretty fast." And my voice was shaky too, but not because I felt like laughing any.

He spat, eying me arrogantly. The ground rose to where he stood, and our heads were about on a level. But I felt he was looking down.

"Pretty fast!" he sneered. "Faster'n anybody!"

"I reckon it is, at that," I said.

"Know how I do it?"

"No."

"I *think*, Doolin. I *think* my gun into my hand. How d'you like that?"

"It's awful fast, Buck."

"I just *think*, and my gun is there in my hand. Some draw, huh!"

"Sure is."

"You're damn right it is, Doolin. Faster'n anybody!"

I didn't know what his gabbling about "thinking his gun into his hand" meant — at least not then, I didn't — but I sure wasn't minded to question him on it. He looked wild-eyed enough right now to start taking bites out of the nearest tree.

He spat again and looked me up and down. "You know, you can go to hell, Joe Doolin. You're a lousy, God damn, white-livered

son of a bitch." He grinned coldly.

Not an insult, I knew now, but a deliberate taunt. I'd broken jaws for a lot less — I'm no runt, and I'm quick enough to hand back crap if some lands on me. But now I wasn't interested.

He saw I was mad, though, and stood waiting.

"You're fast enough, Buck," I said, "so I got no idea of trying you. You want to murder me, I guess I can't stop you — but I ain't drawing. No, sir, that's for sure."

"And a coward to boot," he jeered.

"Maybe," I said. "Put yourself in my place, and ask yourself why in hell I should kill myself?"

"Yellow!" he snarled, looking at me with his bulging eyes full of meanness and confidence.

My shoulders got tight, and it ran down along my gun arm. I never took that from a man before.

"I won't draw," I said. "Reck-on I'll move on instead, if you'll let me."

And I picked up my reins, moving my hands real careful-like, and turned my horse around and started down the slope. I could feel his eyes on me, and I was half-waiting for a bullet in the back. But it didn't come. Instead Buck Tarrant called, "Doolin!"

I turned my head. "Yeah?"

He was standing there in the

same position. Somehow he reminded me of a crazy, runt wolf — his eyes were almost yellowish, and when he talked he moved his lips too much, mouthing his words, and his big crooked teeth flashed in the sun. I guess all the hankering for toughness in him was coming out — he was acting now like he'd always wanted to — cōcky, unafraid, mean — because now he wore a bigger gun than anybody. It showed all over him, like poison coming out of his skin.

"Doolin," he called. "I'll be in town around three this afternoon. Tell Ben Randolph for me that he's a son of a bitch. Tell him he's a dunghead sheriff. Tell him he'd better look me up when I get there, or else get outa town and stay out. You got that?"

"I got it, Buck."

"Call me Mr. Tarrant, you Irish bastard."

"Okay . . . Mr. Tarrant," I said, and reached the bottom of the slope and turned my horse along the road through the Pass. About a hundred yards farther on, I hipped around in the saddle and looked back. He was practising again — the crouch, the fantastic draw, the shot.

I rode on toward town, to tell Ben Randolph he'd either have to run or die.

Ben was a lanky, slab-sided Texan who'd come up north on a

drive ten years before and liked the Arizona climate and stayed. He was a good sheriff — tough enough to handle most men, and smart enough to handle the rest. Fourteen years of it had kept him lean and fast.

When I told him about Buck, I could see he didn't know whether he was tough or smart or fast enough to get out of this one.

He leaned back in his chair and started to light his pipe, and then stared at the match until it burned his fingers without touching it to the tobacco.

"You sure, Joe?" he said.

"Ben, I saw it four times. At first I just couldn't believe my eyes — but I tell you, he's fast. He's faster'n you or me or Hickock or anybody. God knows where he got it, but he's got the speed."

"But," Ben Randolph said, lighting another match, "it just don't happen that way." His voice was almost mildly complaining. "Not overnight. Gun-speed's something you work on — it comes slow, mighty slow. You know that. How in hell could Buck Tarrant turn into a fire-eating gunslinger in a few days?" He paused and puffed. "You sure, Joe?" he asked again, through a cloud of smoke.

"Yes."

"And he wants me."

"That's what he said."

Ben Randolph sighed. "He's

a bad kid, Joe — just a bad kid. If his father hadn't died, I reckon he might have turned out better. But his mother ain't big enough to wallop his butt the way it needs."

"You took his gun away from him a couple times, didn't you, Ben?"

"Yeah. And ran him outa town too, when he got too pestiferous. Told him to get the hell home and help his ma."

"Guess that's why he wants you."

"That. And because I'm sheriff. I'm the biggest gun around here, and he don't want to start at the bottom, not him. He's gonna show the world right away."

"He can do it, Ben."

He sighed again. "I know. If what you say's true, he can sure show *me* anyhow. Still, I got to take him up on it. You know that. I can't leave town."

I looked at his hand lying on his leg — the fingers were trembling. He curled them into a fist, and the fist trembled.

"You ought to, Ben," I said.

"Of course I ought to," he said, a little savagely. "But I can't. Why, what'd happen to this town if I was to cut and run? Is there anyone else who could handle him? Hell, no."

"A crazy galoot like that," I said slowly, "if he gets too damn nasty, is bound to get kilt." I hesitated. "Even in the

back, if he's too good to take from the front."

"Sure," Ben Randolph said. "Sooner or later. But what about meantime? . . . how many people will he have to kill before somebody gets angry or nervy enough to kill *him*? That's my job, Joe — to take care of this kind of thing. Those people he'd kill are depending on me to get between him and them. Don't you see?"

I got up. "Sure, Ben, I see. I just wish *you* didn't."

He let out another mouthful of smoke. "You got any idea what he meant about thinking his gun into his hand?"

"Not the slightest. Some crazy explanation he made up to account for his sudden speed, I reckon."

Another puff. "You figure I'm a dead man, Joe, huh?"

"It looks kind of that way."

"Yeah, it kind of does, don't it?"

At four that afternoon Buck Tarrant came riding into town like he owned it. He sat his battered old saddle like a rajah on an elephant, and he held his right hand low beside his hip in an exaggerated gunman's stance. With his floppy hat over at a cocky angle, and his big eyes and scrawny frame, he'd have looked funny as hell trying to look like a tough hombre — ex-

cept that he ~~was~~ tough now, and everybody in town knew it because I'd warned them. Otherwise somebody might have jibed him, and the way things were now, that could lead to a sudden grave.

Nobody said a word all along the street as he rode to the hitchrail in front of the Once Again and dismounted. There wasn't many people around ~~to~~ say anything — most everybody was inside, and all you could see of them was a shadow of movement behind a window there, the flutter of a curtain there.

Only a few men sat in chairs along the boardwalks under the porches, or leaned against the porchposts, and they just sort of stared around, looking at Buck for a second and then looking off again if he turned toward them.

I was standing near to where Buck hitched up. He swaggered up the steps of the saloon, his right hand poised, his bulging eyes full of hell.

"You tell him?" he asked.

I nodded. "He'll look you up, like you said."

Buck laughed shortly. "I'll be waiting. I don't like that lanky bastard. I reckon I got some scores to settle with him." He looked at me, and his face twisted into what he thought was a tough snarl. Funny — you could see he really wasn't tough down in-

side. There wasn't any hard core of confidence and strength. His toughness was in his holster, and all the rest of him was acting to match up to it.

"You know," he said, "I don't like you either, Irish. Maybe I oughta kill you. Hell, why not?"

Now, the only reason I'd stayed out of doors that afternoon was I figured Buck had already had one chance to kill me and hadn't done it, so I must be safe. That's what I figured — he had nothing against me, so I was safe. And I had an idea that maybe, when the showdown came, I might be able to help out Ben Randolph somehow — if anything on God's Earth *could* help him.

Now, though, I wished to hell I hadn't stayed outside. I wished I was behind one of them windows, looking out at somebody else get told by Buck Tarrant that maybe he oughta kill him.

"But I won't," Buck said, grinning nastily. "Because you done me a favor. You run off and told the sheriff just like I told you — just like the goddam white-livered Irish sheepherder you are. Ain't that so?"

I nodded, my jaw set so hard with anger that the flesh felt stretched.

He waited for me to move against him. When I didn't, he laughed and swaggered to the door of the saloon. "Come on, Irish," he said over his shoulder. "I'll

buy you a drink of the best."

I followed him in, and he went over to the bar, walking heavy, and looked old Menner right in the eye and said, "Give me a bottle of the best stuff you got in the house."

Menner looked at the kid he'd kicked out of his place a dozen times, and his face was white. He reached behind him and got a bottle and put it on the bar.

"Two glasses," said Buck Tarrant.

Menner carefully put two glasses on the bar.

"Clean glasses."

Menner polished two other glasses on his apron and set them down.

"You don't want no money for this likker, do you, Menner?" Buck asked.

"No, sir."

"You'd just take it home and spend it on that fat heifer of a wife you got, and on them two little halfwit brats, wouldn't you?"

Menner nodded.

"Hell, they really ain't worth the trouble, are they?"

"No, sir."

Buck snickered and poured two shots and handed me one. He looked around the saloon and saw that it was almost empty — just Menner behind the bar, and a drunk asleep with his head on his arms at a table near the back,

and a little gent in fancy town clothes fingering his drink at a table near the front window and not even looking at us.

"Where is everybody?" he asked Menner.

"Why, sir, I reckon they're home, most of them," Menner said. "It being a hot day and all —"

"Bet it'll get hotter," Buck said, hard.

"Yes, sir."

"I guess they didn't want to really feel the heat, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it's going to get so hot, you old bastard, that everybody'll feel it. You know that?"

"If you say so, sir."

"It might even get hot for you. Right now even. What do you think of that, huh?"

"I — I —"

"You thrun me outa here a couple times, remember?"

"Y-yes . . . but I —"

"Look at this!" Buck said — and his gun was in his hand, and he didn't seem to have moved at all, not an inch. I was looking right at him when he did it — his hand was on the bar, resting beside his shotglass, and then suddenly his gun was in it and pointing right at old Menner's belly.

"You know," Buck said, grinning at how Menner's fear was crawling all over his face, "I can put a bullet right where I

want to. Wanta see me do it?"

His gun crashed, and flame leaped across the bar, and the mirror behind the bar had a spiderweb of cracks radiating from a round black hole.

Menner stood there, blood leaking down his neck from a split earlobe.

Buck's gun went off again, and the other earlobe was a red tatter.

And Buck's gun was back in its holster with the same speed it had come out — I just couldn't see his hand move.

"That's enough for now," he told Menner. "This is right good likker, and I guess I got to have somebody around to push it across the bar for me, and you're as good as anybody to do jackass jobs like that."

He didn't ever look at Menner again. The old man leaned back against the shelf behind the bar, trembling, two trickles of red running down his neck and staining his shirt collar — I could see he wanted to touch the places where he'd been shot, to see how bad they were or just to rub at the pain, but he was afraid to raise a hand. He just stood there, looking sick.

Buck was staring at the little man in town clothes, over by the window. The little man had reared back at the shots, and now he was sitting up in his chair, his eyes straight on Buck. The table in

front of him was wet where he'd spilled his drink when he'd jumped.

Buck looked at the little guy's fancy clothes and small mustache and grinned. "Come on," he said to me, and picked up his drink and started across the floor. "Find out who the dude is."

He pulled out a chair and sat down — and I saw he was careful to sit facing the front door, and also where he could see out the window.

I pulled out another chair and sat.

"Good shooting, huh?" Buck asked the little guy.

"Yes," said the little guy. "Very fine shooting. I confess, it quite startled me."

Buck laughed harshly. "Startled the old guy too . . ." He raised his voice. "Ain't that right, Menner? Wasn't you startled?"

"Yes, sir," came Menner's pain-filled voice from the bar.

Buck looked back at the little man — let his insolent gaze travel up and down the fancy waistcoat, the string tie, the sharp face with its mustache and narrow mouth and black eyes. He looked longest at the eyes, because they didn't seem to be scared.

He looked at the little guy, and the little guy looked at Buck, and finally Buck looked away. He tried to look wary as he did it, as if he was just fixing to make sure that nobody was around to sneak-

shoot him — but you could see he'd been stared down.

When he looked back at the little guy, he was scowling. "Who're you, mister?" he said. "I never seen you before."

"My name is Jacob Pratt, sir. I'm just traveling through to San Francisco. I'm waiting for the evening stage."

"Drummer?"

"Excuse me?"

For a second Buck's face got ugly. "You heard me, mister. You a drummer?"

"I heard you, young man, but I don't quite understand. Do you mean, am I a musician? A performer upon the drums?"

"No, you goddam fool — I mean, what're you selling? Snake-bite medicine? Likker? Soap?"

"Why — I'm not selling anything. I'm a professor, sir."

"Well, I'll be damned." Buck looked at him a little more carefully. "A perlessor, huh? Of what?"

"Of psychology, sir."

"What's that?"

"It's the study of man's behavior — of the reasons why we act as we do."

Buck laughed again, and it was more of a snarl. "Well, perlessor, you just stick around here then, and I'll show you some *real* reasons for people acting as they do! From now on, I'm the big reason in this town . . . they'll jump when I yell frog, or else!"

His hand was flat on the table in front of him — and suddenly his Peacemaker was in it, pointing at the professor's fourth vest button. "See what I mean huh?"

The little man blinked. "Indeed I do," he said, and stared at the gun as if hypnotized. Funny, though — he still didn't seem scared — just a lot interested.

Sitting there and just listening, I thought about something else funny — how they were both just about of a size, Buck and the professor, and so strong in different ways: with the professor, you felt he was strong inside — a man who knew a lot, about things and about himself — while with Buck it was all on the outside, on the surface: he was just a milksop kid with a deadly sting.

Buck was still looking at the professor, as carefully as he had before. He seemed to hesitate for a second, his mouth twisting. Then he said, "You're an eddicated man, ain't you? I mean, you studied a lot. Ain't that right?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Well . . ." Again Buck seemed to hesitate. The gun in his hand lowered until the end of the barrel rested on the table. "Look," he said slowly, "maybe you can tell me how in hell . . ."

When he didn't go on, the professor said, "Yes?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to say — ?"

Buck looked at him, his bulging eyes narrowed, the gunman's smirk on his lips again. "Are you telling me what's true and what ain't," he said softly, "with my gun on you?"

"Does the gun change anything?"

Buck tapped the heavy barrel on the table. "I say it changes a hell of a lot of things." *Tap* went the barrel. "You wanta argue?"

"Not with the gun," the professor said calmly. "It always wins. I'll talk with you, however, if you'll talk with your mouth instead of with the gun."

By this time I was filled with admiration for the professor's guts, and fear that he'd get a bullet in them . . . I was all set to duck, in case Buck should lose his temper and start throwing lead.

But suddenly Buck's gun was back in his holster. I saw the professor blink again in astonishment.

"You know," Buck said, grinning loosely, "you got a lotta nerve, professor. Maybe you *can* tell me what I wanta know."

He didn't look at the little man while he talked — he was glancing around, being "wary" again. And grinning that grin at the same time. You could see he was off-balance — he was acting like everything was going on just like he wanted it; but actually the professor had beaten him again,

words against the gun, eyes against eyes.

The professor's dark eyes were level on Buck's right now. "What is it you want to know?"

"This —" Buck said, and his gun was in his hand again, and it was the first time when he did it that his face stayed sober and kind of stupid-looking, his normal expression, instead of getting wild and dangerous. "How — do you know how do I do it?"

"Well," the professor said, "suppose you give me your answer first, if you have one. It might be the right one."

"I —" Buck shook his head — "Well, it's like I *think* the gun into my hand. It happened the first time this morning. I was standing out in the Pass where I always practise drawing, and I was wishing I could draw faster'n anybody who ever lived — I was wishing I could just get my gun outa leather in no time at all. And —" the gun was back in his holster in the blink of an eye — "that's how it happened. My gun was in my hand. Just like that. I didn't even reach for it — I was just getting set to draw, and had my hand out in front of me . . . and my gun was in my hand before I knew what'd happened. God, I was so surprised I almost fell over!"

"I see," said the professor

slowly. "You *think* it into your hand?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"Would you do it now, please?"

And the professor leaned forward so he could see Buck's holster, eyes intent.

Buck's gun appeared in his hand.

The professor let out a long breath. "Now think it back into its holster."

It was there.

"You did not move your arm either time," said the professor.

"That's right," said Buck.

"The gun was just suddenly in your hand instead of in your holster. And then it was back in the holster."

"Right."

"Telekinesis," said the professor, almost reverently.

"Telewhat?"

"Telekinesis — the moving of material objects by mental force." The professor leaned back and studied the holstered gun. "It *must* be that. I hardly dared think it at first — the first time you did it. But the thought did occur to me. And now I'm virtually certain!"

"How do you say it?"

"T-e-l-e-k-i-n-e-s-i-s."

"Well, how do I *do* it?"

"I can't answer that. Nobody knows. It's been the subject of many experiments, and there are many reported happenings — but

I've never heard of any instance even remotely as impressive as this." The professor leaned across the table again. "Can you do it with other things, young man?"

"What other things?"

"That bottle on the bar, for example."

"Never tried."

"Try."

Buck stared at the bottle.

It wavered. Just a little. Rocked, and settled back.

Buck stared harder, eyes bulging.

The bottle shivered. That was all.

"Hell," Buck said. "I can't seem to — to get ahold of it with my mind, like I can with my gun."

"Try moving this glass on the table," the professor said. "It's smaller, and closer."

Buck stared at the glass. It moved a fraction of an inch across the tabletop. No more.

Buck snarled like a dog and swatted the glass with his hand, knocking it halfway across the room.

"Possibly," the professor said, after a moment, "you can do it with your gun because you want to so very badly. The strength of your desire releases — or creates — whatever psychic forces are necessary to perform the act." He paused, looking thoughtful. "Young man, suppose you try to transport your gun to — say, to

the top of the bar."

"Why?" Buck asked suspiciously.

"I want to see whether distance is a factor where the gun is concerned. Whether you can place the gun that far away from you, or whether the power operates only when you want your gun in your hand."

"No," Buck said in an ugly voice. "Damn if I will. I'd maybe get my gun over there and not be able to get it back, and then you'd jump me — the two of you. I ain't minded to experiment around too much, thank you."

"All right," the professor said, as if he didn't care. "The suggestion was purely in the scientific spirit —"

"Sure," said Buck. "Sure. Just don't get any more scientific, or I'll experiment on how many holes you can get in you before you die."

The professor sat back in his chair and looked Buck right in the eye. After a second, Buck looked away, scowling.

Me, I hadn't said a word the whole while, and I wasn't talking now.

"Wonder where that goddam yellow-bellied sheriff is?" Buck said. He looked out the window, then glanced sharply at me. "He said he'd come, huh?"

"Yeah." When I was asked, I'd talk.

We sat in silence for a few mo-

ments.

The professor said, "Young man, you wouldn't care to come with me to San Francisco, would you? I and my colleagues would be very grateful for the opportunity to investigate this strange gift of yours—we would even be willing to pay you for your time and —"

Buck laughed. "Why, hell, I reckon I got bigger ideas'n that, mister! *Real* big ideas. There's no man alive I can't beat with a gun! I'm going to take Billy the Kid . . . Hickock . . . all of them! I'm going to get myself a rep bigger'n all theirs put together. Why, when I walk into a saloon, they'll hand me likker. I walk into a bank, they'll give me the place. No lawman from Canada to Mexico will even stay in the same town with me! Hell, what could you give me, you goddam little dude?"

The professor shrugged. "Nothing that would satisfy you."

"That's right." Suddenly Buck stiffened, looking out the window. He got up, his bulging blue eyes staring down at us. "Randolph's coming down the street! You two just stay put, and maybe—just maybe—I'll let you live. Professor, I wanta talk to you some more about this telekinesis stuff. Maybe I can get even faster than I am, or control my bullets better at long range. So you be here, get that?"

He turned and walked out the door.

The professor said, "He's not sane."

"Nutty as a locoed steer," I said. "Been that way for a long time. An ugly shrimp who hates everything—and now he's in the saddle holding the reins, and some people are due to get rode down." I looked curiously at him. "Look, professor—this telekinesis stuff—is all that on the level?"

"Absolutely."

"He just *thinks* his gun into his hand?"

"Exactly."

"Faster than anyone could ever draw it?"

"Inconceivably faster. The time element is almost non-existent."

I got up, feeling worse than I'd ever felt in my life. "Come on," I said. "Let's see what happens."

As if there was any doubt about what was bound to happen.

We stepped out onto the porch and over to the rail. Behind us, I heard Menner come out too. I looked over my shoulder. He'd wrapped a towel around his head. Blood was leaking through it. He was looking at Buck, hating him clear through.

The street was deserted except for Buck standing about twenty feet away, and, at the far end, Sheriff Ben Randolph coming slowly toward him, putting one

foot ahead of the other in the dust.

A few men were standing on porches, pressed back against the walls, mostly near doors. Nobody was sitting now — they were ready to groundhog if lead started flying wild.

"God damn it," I said in a low, savage voice. "Ben's too good a man to get kilt this way. By a punk kid with some crazy psychowhosis way of handling a gun."

I felt the professor's level eyes on me, and turned to look at him.

"Why," he said, "doesn't a group of you get together and face him down? Ten guns against his one. He'd have to surrender."

"No, he wouldn't," I said. "That ain't the way it works. He'd just dare any of us to be the first to try and stop him — and none of us would take him up on it. A group like that don't mean anything — it'd be each man against Buck Tarrant, and none of us good enough."

"I see," the professor said softly.

"God . . ." I clenched my fists so hard they hurt. "I wish we could think his gun right back into the holster or something!"

Ben and Buck were about forty feet apart now. Ben was coming on steadily, his hand over his gunbutt. He was a good man with a gun, Ben — nobody around these parts had dared tackle him

for a long time. But he was out-classed now, and he knew it. I guess he was just hoping that Buck's first shot or two wouldn't kill him, and that he could place a good one himself before Buck let loose any more.

But Buck was a damn good shot. He just wouldn't miss.

The professor was staring at Buck with a strange look in his eyes.

"He should be stopped," he said.

"Stop him, then," I said sourly.

"After all," he mused, "if the ability to perform telekinesis lies dormant in all of us, and is released by strong faith and desire to accomplish something that can be accomplished only by that means — then our desire to stop him might be able to counter his desire to —"

"Damn you and your big words," I said bitterly.

"It was your idea," the professor said, still looking at Buck. "What you said about thinking

his gun back into its holster — after all, we *are* two to his one —"

I turned around and stared at him, really hearing him for the first time. "Yeah, that's right — I said that! My God . . . do you think we could do it?"

"We can try," he said. "We know it *can* be done, and evidently that is nine-tenths of the battle. He can do it, so we should be able to. We must want him *not* to

more than he wants to."

"Lord," I said, "I want him not to, all right . . ."

Ben and Buck were about twenty feet apart now, and Ben stopped.

His voice was tired when he said, "Any time, Buck."

"You're a hell of a sheriff," Buck sneered. "You're a no-good bastard."

"Cuss me out," Ben said. "Don't hurt me none. I'll be ready when you start talking with guns."

"I'm ready now, beanpole," Buck grinned. "You draw first, huh?"

"*Think of his gun!*" the professor said in a fierce whisper. "Try to grab it with your mind — break his aim — pull it away from him — *you know it can be done!* *Think, think —*"

Ben Randolph had never in anyone's knowledge drawn first against a man. But now he did, and I guess nobody could blame him.

He slapped leather, his face already dead — and Buck's Peace-maker was in his hand —

And me and the professor were standing like statues on the porch of the Once Again, thinking at that gun, glaring at it, fists clenched, our breath rasping in our throats.

The gun appeared in Buck's

hand, and wobbled just as he slipped hammer. The bullet sprayed dust at Ben's feet.

Ben's gun was halfway out.

Buck's gunbarrel pointed down at the ground, and he was trying to lift it so hard his hand got white. He drove a bullet into the dust at his own feet, and stared to whips.

Ben's gun was up and aiming.

Buck shot himself in the foot.

Then Ben shot him once in the right elbow, once in the right shoulder. Buck screamed and dropped his gun and threw out his arms, and Ben, who was a thorough man, put a bullet through his right hand, and another one on top of it.

Buck sat in the dust and flapped blood all around, and bawled when we came to get him.

The professor and I told Ben Randolph what had happened, and nobody else. I think he believed us.

Buck spent two weeks in the town jail, and then a year in the state pen for pulling on Randolph, and nobody's seen him now for six years. Don't know what happened to him, or care much. I reckon he's working as a cowhand someplace — anyway, he sends his mother money now and then, so he must have tamed down some and grewed up some too.

While he was in the town jail,

the professor talked to him a lot — the professor delayed his trip just to do it.

One night he told me, "Tarrant can't do anything like that again. Not at all, even with his left hand. The gunfight destroyed his faith in his ability to do it — or most of it, anyway. And I finished the job, I guess, asking all my questions. I guess you can't think too much about that sort of thing."

The professor went on to San Francisco, where he's doing some interesting experiments. Or trying to. Because he has the memory of what happened that day — but, like Buck Tarrant, not the ability to do anything like that any more. He wrote me a couple times, and it seems that ever since that time he's been absolutely unable to do any telekinesis. He's tried a thousand times and can't even

move a feather.

So he figures it was really me alone who saved Ben's life and stopped Buck in his tracks.

I wonder. Maybe the professor just knows too much not to be some skeptical, even with what he saw. Maybe the way he looks at things and tries to find reasons for them gets in the way of his faith.

Anyway, he wants me to come to San Francisco and get experimented on. Maybe someday I will. Might be fun, if I can find time off from my job.

I got a lot of faith, you see. What I see, I believe. And when Ben retired last year, I took over his job as sheriff — because I'm the fastest man with a gun in these parts. Or, actually, in the world. Probably if I wasn't the peaceable type, I'd be famous or something.

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